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"NO, NO, SPITFIRE! I COULD NEVER TAKE THAT SCALP," CRIED NED IN HORROR.

OR,

The Young King of the Gold Mines.

A Romance of a Border Boy's Life.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "WIL-
ARD WILL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FOR ANOTHER'S SAKE.

"SCHOOLMASTER, whip me, sir, and let little Bennie off, 'cause he's lame, and I don't believe he did it, anyhow."

The speaker was the subject of this sketch, a boy then of twelve, and called by his comrades Rifle Ned.

The scene was in a small country school-house

in the State of Pennsylvania, and the time twenty-five years ago.

A stern-faced, impatient teacher, a man of fifty, sat like a monarch on his throne, before two-score of children, boys and girls, who trembled at his slightest nod or word.

Some one had, during recess, gone to the master's desk and spilled the ink over his books and papers, and coming in suddenly a boy of ten, Bennie Brookes, a cripple, had been seen with ink-covered hands and handkerchief, but had denied being the culprit.

The master had called the school to order, had gotten his bunch of switches ready, and was going to belabor Bennie, when Ned Oliver arose in his seat and made the daring and manly request that opens this story.

"Did you do it, sir?" sternly asked the teacher.

"No, sir, and I don't believe Bennie did; but I'll take the licking for him."

The manhood of the teacher should have been touched by this, but it was not; he was not that kind of a man, and smiling grimly, he said:

"All right, sir; if you wish it I'll gratify you."

Ned promptly walked up to the "mourner's bench," as the scholars called the seat before the teacher, and waited.

"Take off your jacket, sir."

It was cast aside quickly, while Bennie Brookes cried out:

"Master, I didn't do it, sir, I declare to you, and cross my heart, I didn't; but please don't whip Ned, sir—please don't!"

The teacher was merciless, and he heeded not the pleading of the little cripple, but said:

"So you wish me to whip you instead of Bennie Brookes?"

"Yes, sir," promptly responded Ned.

"I will do it," and with a grim smile the bunch of switches fell upon the shoulders of the brave boy.

He was pale, for he knew well that the man gave no gentle whipping to a scholar; but two-score pair of eyes were upon him, some older by several years than he was, and he was determined to keep up his reputation for courage.

He flinched under the heavy blows—who would not have done so?—but he did not move from his tracks.

Poor Little Bennie Brookes buried his face in his hands and wept bitterly, seeming to feel the cruel blows more than did the recipient.

The red stains soon showed through the shirt, convincing proof that the teacher was determined to make the lad cry for mercy; but Ned stood the severe ordeal bravely, though his face was livid, and his features writhed with pain.

"Now, sir, for daring to step between me and my just punishment to another, I have given you a lesson you will remember," fiercely cried the master, and then he turned to Bennie Brookes, and said:

"Take off your jacket."

"You ain't going to whip Bennie too?" cried Ned.

"I am."

"You whipped me for him, master, and you must not touch poor Bennie, for he's lame and mustn't be hurt."

"Go to your seat, sir, or I'll trounce you again!" yelled the teacher, and then he sprung toward Bennie.

But, quick as a flash, Ned turned, threw out his foot, and tripped the man, who fell heavily, striking his head against a bench, and lay there motionless.

"Oh! Ned, you have killed him!" was the cry that arose in a chorus of voices.

"Run, Ned! run!" yelled a large boy.

"Yes, Ned, run and hide, or they will hang you! Please go!" cried Bennie Brookes; and Ned stood an instant gazing at the motionless form of the teacher, and then, alarmed at the words, "they will hang you!" he bounded out of the door like a flash, and disappeared in the forest beyond.

CHAPTER II.

THE BOY FUGITIVE.

NED OLIVER lived with relatives in a thinly-settled part of Pennsylvania, being adopted by them as their child; he had been brought up upon a farm, doing chores about the place and also attending the country school nearly two miles distant from where he lived.

He was a handsome, golden-haired boy, with expressive blue eyes, and a slender, wiry frame, capable of the greatest endurance.

He had become noted as a lucky fisherman and a rifle-shot, and was wont to pick squirrels out of the tops of the highest trees with a rifle that an uncle had given him.

As he was seldom seen without this favorite weapon, he won the name of Rifle Ned.

A noble-hearted boy, he often carried the teacher presents of game and fish, and did many little acts of kindness for him, while always willing to study, and bright-witted, he gave no cause of complaint, except in cases of extreme mischievousness, for Ned loved mischief at all times.

When the teacher turned upon him that day, it was a surprise to all the scholars; but then the master was in ill-humor and wished to vent it on some one, so Ned had to suffer.

Flying from the school-room, believing that the master had been killed by his fall, Ned took to the forest, which he knew well.

Until dark he remained in its recesses, and then he cautiously made his way home.

He had no intention of giving himself up to be hanged, as he believed he would be, but he also had no thought of going away without his trusted rifle.

So Ned meant to make a bold stroke to get it.

His room was in the attic of the old farmhouse, and a large tree growing near spread its protecting branches far over upon the roof.

"I can climb the old tree, get on the roof and thus creep in through the dormer window into my room."

So he stole up to the house several hours after sunset.

All was quiet there, for the family retired early, as he knew, and up the tree he went, out upon the limb, and thence to the roof without even disturbing the watch-dog.

As he reached the dormer window he paused and listened, fearing that some one might be within, expecting that he would enter the house, and catch him.

But all was silent within and softly he entered.

He knew where the tallow candle stood, and lighted it.

His room had not been troubled, for there stood his rifle in the corner, and his ammunition hung near.

A small revolver, which he had bought with his own savings, was on the shelf, and quickly did Ned rig himself out in his hunting costume, put the weapon in his belt, and with his blanket rolled up tightly, strap it to his back.

His haversack, in which he was wont to carry game and lunch, he also took with him, and taking an old soft hat, for he had left his at the school-house, he was ready to start.

Then he wrote on a piece of paper, with a pencil, the following:

"Good-by all, for I am gone away."

"I did not mean to kill the teacher, and am awful sorry; but I did not want him to whip poor Bennie."

"Don't look for me, for you can't find me."

"NED."

Having left this farewell letter on the table, he slipped out of the window, crept along the roof, and descended to the ground by way of the tree.

The large Newfoundland watch-dog suddenly came bounding toward the boy, with a yelp of joy, and, in spite of all he could do, Ned could not make him go back.

"Well, Turk, if you will go I can't help it, and I'm awful glad to have you, for you are my dog anyway; but let us go to the milk-house and see what we can get to eat."

The milk-house was over the spring, and Ned knew that he would find plenty to eat there, and, as it was never locked, he had no difficulty in gaining entrance.

Turk was given a good supper, and Ned ate a hearty meal, for he was hungry, and then he stowed away cold meats, a pie and a couple of loaves of bread in his haversack.

"Now we must be off, Turk," and the boy started on his flight from home, the dog trotting close at his heels.

He had already formed his plan of action, which was to go to the home of his bachelor uncle, who lived in the West, the same who had given him his rifle.

He had about seventeen dollars with him, the little money he had saved up, from the sale of game, and for work he had done on extra time, and so he felt quite rich.

So through the forests, and over the hills Ned trudged along, Turk wondering at the long tramp, but keeping close by his master's side.

At daylight Ned was fifteen miles away from home, and very tired and sleepy, so he shot a bird, dressed it, built a fire, and after breakfast went into camp in a secluded nook.

It was noon before he awoke and then he set out on his way once more, avoiding the highways, which he knew well, and keeping along the country lanes and across the fields.

When night came he rested a couple of hours,

ate supper, and with Turk, still greatly wondering, sought the public road and pushed on once more.

Thus the brave boy held on his way for three days.

His bread was gone and he had only game to depend upon, so he determined to seek some country store and replenish his larder.

One was soon found, and here Ned bought a piece of bacon, a frying-pan, tin cup, some coffee, crackers, sugar and salt, and a hatchet.

Thus equipped he set out once more, telling the man who had questioned him, that he was going to visit relatives in another State.

After a two weeks' tramp, through storm and sunshine, by night and day, never entering a house, and avoiding mankind all in his power, Ned reached a railroad station and made inquiries as to a ticket to the western State where his uncle lived.

He found that his finances would not carry him there, if he bought a ticket, and the kind-hearted station-agent told him his brother was a conductor on a through freight train, and he would ask him to give him a lift.

This he did, and Ned reached a point where he had money enough to buy a ticket through to the little town where his uncle dwelt.

It was just nightfall, three weeks after his leaving home, that the Boy Fugitive walked up to his uncle's house.

He saw white-covered wagons camped near, with horses and mules staked out, and about several fires were a number of men gathered.

Ned was frightened, for in the enormity of his act his first thought was:

"They are looking for me."

But tired out, sorrowing, wretched and penniless, having eaten his last morsel, and with the faithful Turk growing very thin and careworn, he was almost desperate, so walked boldly up to the door and asked:

"Is Captain John Oliver here?"

"I am John Oliver, my lad," said a handsome man, rigged out in top-boots, broad hat and a corduroy suit.

"I am Ned, Uncle John," said the boy, timidly.

"By Jupiter! but you are, and right glad am I to see you, lad."

"But what are you doing out here? Ah! I can guess, for I received word from home that you had skipped, thinking you had killed the old schoolmaster, but in packing up to go West I had forgotten it."

"Didn't I kill him, Uncle John?" eagerly asked Ned.

"No. The old fellow struck his head against a bench, they wrote me, and was stunned; but all say you did right."

"Now, tell me, how did you get here?"

But Ned was so overcome with joy to find he had not killed the teacher that he burst into tears.

"Come, lad, you are tired out and have had a hard time of it, as both you and your dog show; but you are all right now, for I am going out to Nevada; join this train which starts to-morrow, and you shall go with me, for I have several horses, one small one that will just suit you, and I'll make a miner out of you."

And his uncle kept his word, for the next day Ned was bound for the far-away Territory, the name of which he now bears.

CHAPTER III.

THE BOY TRAILER.

IN the long trip over the prairies and mountains of the far West, Ned had every opportunity to learn just what a life on the plains was.

In those days the Indians were frequently found to be on the war-path, and fights were often had with them, with victory on the side of the trainmen.

There were rivers to cross, obscure trails to follow, canyons to get over and through, with mountains to climb where four teams would be put to one wagon to draw it up to the summit, while the descents were often so steep that the wheels behind had to be locked, and men with a rope had to hold back upon it.

Buffaloes were sighted and chased, herds of elk would appear and afford sport in shooting, and about the camps at night wild beasts, such as mountain lions, bears and wolves, were frequently seen.

Ned was perfectly delighted with his life on the march, and he had become the particular pet of old Spitfire Pete, the guide and hunter of the train.

Old Pete was given the prefix of Spitfire to his name on account of his ugly disposition and stinging remarks.

He never had a pleasant word for any one, it was said, was silent unless spoken to, and if any

of the boys attempted to joke with him, would always cut them off with some hateful remark.

In the evenings he was wont to come into camp, have a few words with Captain Oliver, the boss of the train, regarding the next day's march, and then sit about the fire, smoking his pipe in grim silence, until bed-time, when he would wrap himself in his blanket and lie down to sleep beneath some wagon.

He was an old man, verging on sixty it was said, with iron-gray hair and beard, a face as hard as leather, but twinkling black eyes that were full of fire and vim.

He was dressed in buckskin, from moccasins to cap, and his rifle and revolvers were of the very best pattern.

His horse was raw-boned, but could go without food and water as long as his master, it was said, and the animal possessed a temper that was even worse.

The first thing that attracted Spitfire Pete's attention to Ned was the boy's shooting with a rifle and revolver, for Captain Oliver put up a twenty-dollar gold-piece as a prize for the best shot, and although Ned did not win it, he made such splendid shots that the old guide was seen to smile with pride as he glanced at the youngster.

A few days after, Ned was riding ahead of the train when he came upon Pete, who asked:

"Whar yer goin', boy?"

"Over to yonder hill, sir," answered Ned, who had a great admiration for the old man.

"What fer?"

"Water, sir."

"Who said thar was water thar?"

"Nobody, sir; but it looked so to me, from the lay of the land."

"Boy, thar is water thar, and it is whar we is goin' ter camp, fer thar hain't no more to be found in twenty odd miles."

"You is a durned good shot, better than half ther men, and yer is goin' ter make a guide and a good one; so if yer wants ter study a leetle o' prairie l'arnin' under me, jist say so."

"I'll be so glad, sir, for no one could teach me half as much," said Ned, delighted at the prospect.

Spitfire Pete looked pleased, and said:

"I'll go on and find a place for a camp, and you wait here and fetch the train on; but yer must be keeful not ter lose my trail, as thar is plenty o' ways o' gittin' lost in this kentry."

"I'll be careful, sir," and Ned, pleased with his importance, waited for the train, and following the trail of the old guide, took the outfit safely to the camp.

"Leetle one, I goes off abroad at daybreak in the morning, so if yer wishes ter go be ready," said Pete, as he started to bed that night.

Ned went to sleep with it on his mind to wake up at a certain hour, and he did so, and was ready to go with Pete when he rode out of camp.

"Who calt yer, boy?"

"Nobody, sir."

"Yer woke up yerself?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yer'll do in ther long run," and Pete seemed pleased with his pupil in prairie craft.

From that day the old man and the boy seemed to be inseparable, for they were together all day, and frequently were gone a couple of days from camp, when the guide made a long trip ahead and waited for the train to come up.

Coming out of his shell of silence, he talked a great deal to Ned, told him how to follow a trail in all weathers, gave him the name of different trees and shrubs, and once or twice, after a most circuitous ride, just to put him at fault would send him back to the train on a message, or for extra ammunition, telling him where to rejoin him.

The result of this thorough training was that Ned became pretty well posted in frontier life, its dangers and its hardships, and his courage increasing with his experience, he longed for an opportunity to show Spitfire Pete that he was not unworthy of his teachings.

It was not very long, after this desire filled his breast that his longing was gratified most thoroughly and just how the next chapter will reveal to the reader.

CHAPTER IV.

THE YOUNG INDIAN-FIGHTER.

ONE day Spitfire Pete sent Ned on ahead, telling him to pick a good trail for the train and to find a pleasant camping-place some twenty-five miles from where they then were.

"I'll see if I can't pick up a leetle game, lad, and find yer in camp; but yer must keep a bright eye fer Injuns," Pete had said.

In great glee Ned had started off, feeling his importance more than ever before.

The way led through a hill country, with valleys here and there, and a small stream to cross.

He picked the best way for the train, marked the trail so that it could be readily followed by the assistant guide that led it, and was crossing a piece of low-land when suddenly a bullet whizzed over his head.

His horse was startled, as well as he, and instantly there came another arrow and it told Ned that at last the time had come when alone, with no help near, he had to face savage red-skins.

He had behaved well in the fights the train had had with the red-skins; but then he had half a hundred men as a protection; now he must meet them singlehanded.

Ned's prairie knowledge told him from whence the arrows had come, when he marked them sticking up in the prairie, and quick as a flash he wheeled away from the point of danger, a small thicket some sixty yards away.

The moment his horse bounded forward there came half a dozen wild yells, followed by a shower of as many arrows, and one of the barbs struck his horse in the neck.

Ned's training served him well now, for he took in a distant hill, with a steep overhanging cliff, and some rocks at the base, the ground being open in front.

He determined to ride for it at full speed, and let the Indians give chase.

If he readily outran them, he would have no fear; but, if their horses were faster than his, then the shelter he observed would be the place for him to seek, and he must try and keep them at bay until the train, ten miles away, came up, or Spitfire Pete, who might hear his rifle.

Another volley of arrows again wounded Ned's horse, and the boy saw that it was no slight injury, from the behavior of the animal.

Looking back he saw that there were six Indians in chase, and they were well mounted, for they were coming on rapidly.

As he feared another shower of arrows, he concluded to show them that they were in range of his rifle, and throwing it to his shoulder, as he turned in the saddle, he fired quickly.

A cry escaped his lips as he saw an Indian pony go down with such suddenness, that his red-skin rider was hurled heavily to the ground.

The other Indians instantly drew rein, though not without firing again at the young fugitive, yet without any damage being done.

"If you was not wounded, Firefly, I'd not fear those reds," said Ned to his horse, who he saw was bleeding freely from both wounds.

But the Indians had halted only for a minute, and then came on all but one, who remained to help his dismounted companion.

Having taken his trappings from his dead pony, the warrior sprung up behind his comrade, and they followed rapidly on in the chase.

"Poor Firefly, you feel bad, I know," said Ned, with deep sympathy for his horse; but he urged the animal on, and, reaching the shelter of rocks under the cliff, sprung from his back, and then turning quickly, fired upon the four Indians coming rapidly toward him.

It was a long-range shot, but he saw one of them reel in his saddle, and, cheered by the belief that he had wounded him, Ned reloaded his rifle with remarkable coolness and quickness, and taking a rest over the top of a rock, again fired.

A red-skin fell from his saddle, and the others half drew rein, but then pressed in until the brave boy, having again quickly loaded, once more drew trigger.

This time it was another pony that fell, and Ned drew his revolver and fired two shots from it quickly.

With yells of rage the red-skins fell back, leaving the pony writhing in death-agony, and carrying their wounded comrade with them to a safe distance, when the two riding the one horse joined them.

"They are holding what Spitfire Pete calls a powwow now, and I guess I can look after Firefly," said Ned, and, having loaded his rifle and revolver, he turned to his horse.

The animal had lain down from weakness, having bled freely. Ned drew out the arrow that still stuck in his flank, but saw that it had gone deep.

"Poor Firefly! I guess you will die," he said, patting the horse kindly, and wiping a tear from his eye, for it was the first horse he ever owned, the one given him by his uncle when he joined the train that night after his long tramp from home.

A startled snort from the horse brought Ned back to his own danger, and he threw his rifle

over the top of the rock as he saw the Indians were again advancing, but on foot, and scattered in a line, five of them, while the sixth remained crouching upon the ground, and evidently wounded badly.

Ned fired at the one nearest to him, and saw him drop quick as a flash and remain motionless; but, as the others did the same, he did not know whether or no he had hit his man.

Just then, clear and ringing, though some distance off, came the sound of a bugle.

It reached the ears of the Indians before it did Ned, and, springing to their feet, four of them darted away.

The fifth remained, and seeing this, the four came back, and raising him in their arms, were hastening with him to their horses, which had been left near the wounded red-skin, when louder and more ringing came the bugle sound, and into sight dashed a horseman, beckoning as though to others to follow quickly.

Instantly the dead Indian was dropped, and the four mounting quickly, two on one pony, rode rapidly away toward the hills.

"Why, that is old Spitfire," said Ned, as the veteran guide came flying along, and alone.

"Where is the cavalry, for I heard the bugle?" Ned said, as Spitfire drew near.

Reaching the dead Indian, the old guide halted and called out:

"Come here, Ned, and git yer scalp, fer it's yourn, sure as shootin', and I'm durned ef yer hain't deservin' of it."

Ned, thus urged, left his retreat and walked toward the guide, who, dismounting, called out:

"Whar's yer horse?"

"Dying, sir."

"Is *you* hurt, lad?"

"No, sir."

"I'm durned glad o' that; but I seen Injun signs soon arter leavin' you, lad, and I concluded ter foller on arter yer, and I'm right peert glad I did."

"So am I, sir."

"Boy, put yer grip thar, and let me congratulate yer on yer fust red-skin, and I'll show yer how to scalp him."

"No, no, Spitfire! I could never take that scalp!" cried Ned in horror at the thought, while he gazed with awe upon the up-turned face of the dead savage.

"Boy, you're young and foolish; but yer'll come to it, some day, for it are ther only way ter fight a Injun; they hain't dead until they is scalped, and I has no marcy on any on 'em, for they had no marcy on me or mine—no, no, no! they kilt my wife and three children, one a boy sich as you is, and they scalped 'em, too, so I is marceless toward ther red devils."

He spoke with a depth of feeling that showed how he suffered, and bending over the dead red-skin cut off his scalplock with a skill that showed long practice.

"But where are the soldiers, sir, for I heard a bugle?" said Ned, anxious to change the current of the old man's thoughts.

"Thar wasn't no cavalry near, boy."

"But I heard the bugle, Spitfire."

"Listen!"

He placed his hands to his lips, and loud, clear, ringing came the exact notes of a bugle.

Ned was amazed, and the guide said:

"It's a trick I has, lad, and it has helped me many a time."

"I heerd yer shot, and seen ther fix yer was in, so I jist bugled, and them Injuns got, as yer seen; but we camps yonder under ther hill until ther train comes up, as I wish 'em ter see what a boy have done as a Injun-fighter."

"I tells yer, boy, I is proud o' yer, and I only wishes yer was my own flesh and blood, bein' as I is all alone in ther world, all alone," and all the harshness had gone from the old man's voice, and Ned knew that those who said he was heartless and cold did not know him, or the causes that had embittered his life.

When the train came up old Spitfire told his story, and Ned became a hero with all in the train, and the old guide seemed most proud of his prairie *protege*.

CHAPTER V.

NED SAVES A LIFE.

IT was a long and hard trip to the train's destination, the then young town of Virginia City, and all who had started on the trail did not reach the end, for here and there one dropped out, killed by Indians, several of them, one dying a natural death and one being killed in a broil one night in camp, so that graves dotted the way all along.

The trip was a revelation to Ned, and it taught him a great deal of just what wild life on the border was.

Arriving in Virginia City, Captain Oliver became interested in several mines, and Ned bade farewell to Spitfire Pete, the old guide, who said to him at parting:

"Lad, you'll make a man some day, and a good one, or I is no judge o' human natur'."

"This here huntin' fer silver and gold in ther ground may be all right, and yer may git rich one o' these days; but ef yer doesn't, and things go wrong with yer, come back to me and I'll larn yer other trails, and yer kin allus make a honest livin' guidin' trains across ther plains."

"Good-by, lad, and don't yer fergit old Pete."

"I never will, and I hope to see you often, Pete," said Ned, who had learned to really love the old man.

Thus they parted, and his uncle being busy with his mines, the boy was allowed to have pretty much his own way.

With his horse, rifle and the faithful Turk, who had stuck to him in the long march, Ned went where he pleased, kept the table well supplied with both fish and game, and got a reputation of being a dead shot and utterly fearless.

A few months after his arrival in Virginia City, a scene occurred that made Ned more of a hero.

It seems there was a stranger stopping at Wright's Hotel in the town, who was not known to any one, and, as he gave no account of himself, some reckless spirits at once surmised that he was a horse-thief, one who had of late stolen a number of valuable animals from the various camps, and run them off to confederates in the mountains, who had hidden them beyond recovery.

A quarrel was picked with the man in the bar, and he was set upon by several desperadoes, one of whom he killed, but sorely wounded and with the odds of a dozen to one against him, he turned and ran up the stairs leading to the second story of the log-house hotel.

His pursuers were quickly following him, and loud arose the yells from a dozen lips:

"Hang him!"

"Up with him!"

"String him up, pard!"

"Show no mercy to ther horse-thief!"

"Make a example o' him!"

But suddenly at the head of the stairs stood a slender form, and the men halted for an instant.

It was a young and lovely woman, the sister of the young proprietor of the hotel.

"What means this chase of this poor man?" she cried, in a voice that all heard.

"He's a horse-thief, missus, and we is going to hang him," said one.

"He jist kilt one o' our pards, miss, and he's got ter swing!" another called out.

Then came the reply, and the young girl's voice was clear and firm:

"This man is a guest in my brother's hotel and you shall not harm him."

"He is wounded badly, and you must await my brother's return, for you shall not hang the man unless he is guilty, and you can prove him so!"

"Them is brave words for a gal, but we wants the feller and we intends ter take him," said one of the gang.

"Yas, fellers, let's take him, but don't hurt ther leddy, fer she means well."

"Go back, or I'll kill you, Turpin!"

It was not the girl that spoke now, but Ned Oliver, who suddenly glided up the steps, wheeled in front of the desperadoes, as they stood on the stairs, and with a revolver in each hand confronted the reckless miners.

"Boys, if the lady wants to protect that wounded man you drove up-stairs just now, you sha'n't say no, for I'll shoot the man who crowds her!"

It was a startling surprise to all to see Ned suddenly place himself at bay between them and their victim, and the miners hesitated.

They all knew the boy well, and were aware that, young as he was, he was a dead shot.

Another thing in favor of Ned, was that his uncle was the employer of the miners, was very popular, and could make or mar any one of them, while all liked the boy also.

Seeing that the men hesitated Ned said:

"Come, boys, don't frighten the lady any more, but wait until her brother comes, and see what he has to say about the man you want to hang."

"That's squar, pards, for I guesses ther feller is hard hit and can't git away," said one.

Such seemed to be the general way of thinking, though one burly fellow said hoarsely:

"You hain't going to let a boy back yer down is yer?"

A few voices assented in this, and the man went on, seeing that he had some backers:

"The feller is a horse-thief sart'in, and the gal jist wants ter perfect him fer show, while thet kid boy thar, hain't a flea-bite in my way."

"You'll find a bullet hits harder than a flea, Jack Hollis, if you attempt to come up these stairs," said Ned firmly, and the crowd laughed, while some of them, not liking Hollis, who was always causing a disturbance in the camps, urged him on, hoping Ned would kill him.

"Does yer dare me, boy?" asked the desperado, angered by the laughter.

"No, I simply tell you not to attempt to crowd Miss Laura Wright," was the lad's firm reply.

"I'll crowd you, youngster, and make yer remember Jack Hollis, for I'll put my mark on yer ear," and the huge bully suddenly drew his knife and sprung up the stairs.

A murmur arose from the crowd, a startled cry came from the maiden, and above all Ned called out:

"Don't press me, Jack!"

"Stop where you are!"

But the bully was nagged on by the crowd, and he said hoarsely:

"I'll clip yer ears, kid."

Then came a pistol-shot and the knife dropped from the bully's broken arm, while Ned cried:

"I winged you that time, Jack."

"Don't make me kill you, for I don't want to."

The boy's voice was pleading, and seeing that the desperado was cowed, the men of better nature in the crowd sprung forward and interfered, dragging Jack Hollis down the stairs and into the bar, where the camp surgeon was sent for to dress his wounded arm, the bone being badly shattered by the bullet from Ned's pistol.

A few moments after Will Wright, the handsome and daring young proprietor of the hotel, returned, and he quickly told the men that the stranger was his friend, and engaged to his sister, and that his accusers were doubtless the horse-thieves.

The stranger was found to be seriously wounded, though the doctor said he would pull through all right, and Ned became considerable of a hero, for the daring manner in which he had gone to the rescue of Miss Laura Wright.

Several months after Ned was surprised to receive as gifts, a splendid horse, from the stranger he had saved, a handsome Mexican saddle, bridle, blanket and complete camp outfit from Miss Laura Wright, and a rifle, pair of revolvers and knife, all of the latest pattern, from Will Wright, as souvenir of their regard for him, and his courageous act.

Ned was perfectly delighted with his presents, and exhibited them through the camps with pardonable pride, where he often heard the warning from friendly miners:

"Look out for Jack Hollis, Ned, for he had his arm cut off, you know, and he means you harm."

CHAPTER VI.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

WHILE in Virginia City, Ned had pretty much his own way.

There was an old schoolmaster in the camps, who taught the boy for a couple of hours each day, and after his study time, which was whenever it was most convenient for the teacher and his pupil, he was wont to go among the mines, learning what he could of mining life, his uncle intending that he should be skilled in such things, so as to take charge when old enough to do so.

There he devoted his time to hunting, fishing and practicing with his rifle and revolvers at targets, until his fame as a shot began to spread far and wide.

A favorite sport of the boy's was to go to a wild stream some distance away, and pass hours in swimming where few men dare venture.

"You'll lose your life there some day, Ned," said his uncle, and this prophecy was often made by others, for it certainly was a most hazardous thing for the boy to attempt to swim in the wild torrent.

Ned lived with his uncle in the camps, and they had pleasant quarters, both of them seeming to enjoy the wild life they led, and the boy was a great deal of company for the man.

One night Captain Oliver came home to his camp, and his negro servant told him Ned had not returned.

As night came on Captain Oliver asked:

"Where did he go, Tom?"

"I think he went hunting, sah, for he took his rifle and pony," answered the negro.

But it grew late and Ned did not return, and Captain Oliver began to grow very anxious about him.

He knew that Ned often stayed out until after nightfall, but never without telling Tom he meant to do so and where he was going.

"Tom, take a run through the camps and see if any one has seen Ned."

"Yes, sah."

"And Tom?"

"Yes, cap'n."

"See if Jack Hollis is in his camp."

"I'll do it, sah, and if he hain't, then I guesses he knows where Mars' Ned is, for he don't like him nohow since he shot his arm off."

So Tom took a run around the camps, but nowhere could the boy be found.

Jack Hollis sat in his cabin, morose and scowling as was his wont since he had lost his arm, and the negro asked him:

"Hain't seen nothin' o' Mars' Ned, has yer, boss?"

"Curse you, no! I'm not the young devil's keeper, so why do you come to me when he's lost?"

"Git!"

Tom "got" very quickly, but he muttered:

"How he know Mars' Ned were lost, I wonder?"

Of course nothing could be done to find the boy that night, but Captain Oliver sent word round to the different camps that Ned was lost, and that the miners should turn out in force in the morning and hunt for him.

At dawn scores of men had passed the Oliver camp, to know if Ned had put in an appearance, and finding that he had not they went in search of him.

There were many who looked with suspicious eyes upon Jack Hollis, knowing that he had sworn vengeance against the boy; but no one had seen him leave camp, and so he could hardly be guilty of having killed Ned, though he was none too good for it all knew.

Toward noon, Captain Oliver and two miners were riding through the woods when they heard the neighing of a horse.

Riding in the direction from whence the sound came, they suddenly beheld Ned's horse tied to a tree growing near the bank of the stream, where it had been prophesied so often the boy would lose his life.

There they also beheld his rifle, belt of arms and his clothing, hat, boots and all, lying upon the bank.

"He has been drowned! I have feared it!" groaned Captain Oliver, who had begun to look upon the boy as his own son.

The pony showed that he had been hitched there for long hours, and all indications were that Ned had, as had been often his wont, gone into the wild torrent to swim and lost his life.

His clothing and arms had been strapped upon his saddle, and Captain Oliver led the pony sadly back to camp, while, when the discovery was made known, a gloom fell upon all in the mines who had known the dashing, handsome lad.

CHAPTER VII.

FRIENDS ON THE TRAIL.

It was the day after the disappearance of Ned, when Jack Hollis, who sat alone in his cabin in the hills, was startled by receiving a visitor.

That visitor suddenly appeared before him, as he sat musing in his cabin, looking out through the open door at the scenery spread out before him.

The one who entered caused the desperado to start and his face to flush.

He had an evil face, scowling eyes, and a large form, marred now by the loss of his right arm.

"Good-mornin'," he said, sullenly, as his visitor stopped in the doorway.

"Good-morning, Mr. Hollis," was the reply, and then came the words:

"I have come to have a talk with you, Jack Hollis."

"Well, spit it out," he said.

"I have come to say, Jack Hollis, that you have made many threats of getting even with the brave boy, who prevented your dragging Mr. Oddie out and hanging him for a crime of which you are guilty."

"Does you accuse me of being a horse-thief, gal?"

"I shall accuse you publicly when I do, sir; but now I wish to ask you where you were coming from day before yesterday when I met you

in the forest, as I was returning from my brother's mine?"

"I was prospecting."

"Who was the man who rode off from you as I came in sight?"

"One of the boys."

"Which one?"

"I don't remember."

"That is bad for you; but, Hollis, the man was a stranger in these camps, as I saw, for I met him before I saw you with him."

"You were coming from where Ned Oliver was drowned, and your pard rode off in that direction."

"I don't know nothin' about the boy."

"I am sure that you do, and I have just come to say, Jack Hollis, that you go with me to the hotel, where you shall have a room until Ned turns up, or I know his fate."

"You can send one of your pards, one who is interested with you, after Ned, for I do not believe you have killed him, and if he does not get back with the boy in one week, then I accuse you publicly of murdering him, and you will be taken out by the miners and hanged to the tree in front of my brother's hotel."

"Does yer take me fer a fool, gal?"

The man's face was livid as he asked the question.

"No, I take you for a man who loves life too well to wish to hang, when you can go free if you send for the boy."

"I don't know nothin' about ther kid."

"Very well, we will see if the Vigilantes can't make you talk."

Laura Wright gave a whistle as she spoke, and quickly there appeared in the doorway three persons.

One was Oddie, the man whom Ned had saved, the other Will Wright, and the third Captain Oliver.

Jack Hollis saw that he was entrapped, and he said gruffly:

"What does this mean?"

"It means, Hollis, that you go with me to my hotel, where I give you quarters until you send for Ned, for you know where he is, or what has become of him."

"I shall have you guarded day and night, and if the boy does not turn up, you hang!" said Will Wright.

"If he do?" eagerly asked the man.

"Then you can go free, with just three hours time to get out of these camps, and it will be death to you if you return."

The desperado stood in silence for full a minute, and then said:

"Ef yer sends Nick Sloan ter me, maybe he can find ther boy."

"I will send him to you after you are safe in my hotel, for you must go with me."

"Why can't I stay here?"

"No, you go with me."

"S'pose I has ter, as yer has ther drop on me."

"And shall keep it, too," was Wright's reply, and the two set out for the hotel, leaving the rest to follow by another way.

"Jack Hollis, if you attempt to run, or raise a row with any one you may meet, I'll kill you," said Will Wright, as they walked along, and the desperado, knowing that he would keep his word made no effort to escape, nor called on any of the men they passed for aid.

Taking him to a secluded room in the hotel, Will Wright left him there, placing over him one of his own faithful men as a guard, while he went off in search of Nick Sloan.

He found that worthy in a low bar-room, and beckoning him out said:

"Jack Hollis wants you."

"What's up, cap'n?"

"He wishes you to go after Ned for him."

"Lordy! how did it get out?" and the man looked frightened.

"Never mind just how; but he wants you to bring Ned here."

"Maybe I'll be too late."

"What do you mean?"

"Them fellers may hev got away with him."

"Killed him?"

"Sure."

"It will be a bad thing for you and Hollis if they have; but I'll give you the best horse in my stables, and you go with all speed after him, and I'll stake you well if you bring him back safe."

"I'll do it."

"You know where to find him?"

"You bet."

"Then see Hollis at once and be off," and Will Wright led the man into the prisoner's room.

Jack Hollis would still have delayed, and de-

nied all knowledge, but Wright told him frankly how he had entrapped Sloan into a confession, and, after a few whispered words between the two, Nick started off on his errand, and the manner in which he hurried showed that he understood how important it was for him to lose no time.

"If I'm too late, why Jack will have to hang, that's sart'in, and I'll not come back to these unhealthy parts," he said to himself as he rode furiously along a mountain trail, mounted upon one of the best horses in the mines.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE HANDS OF FOES.

WHEN Ned rode up to the banks of the stream, and prepared for a swim, he little thought that there were foes upon his trail.

But there were two men watching him closely, saw him hitch his horse carefully, undress, and leaving his rifle and belt of arms against a tree-trunk, go down to the stream.

The roar of the waters drowned the approach of the two horsemen, and Ned had no idea that there was any one within a mile of him.

Leaving the water, after a few minutes of enjoyment, he ran up the bank directly into the arms of the two men.

He was fairly caught and struggling was useless, so he was quickly bound, gagged, and with a blanket tied about him, was placed on a horse, behind one of the men.

His clothes, arms and horse were left, as they were found, to give out the impression that he was drowned, and his captors departed by a lonely trail up through the mountains, on which they knew they would not be likely to meet any one.

Circumstances favored them, and night fell, finding them long miles away from the camp, and in the deepest recesses of the mountains, where no one ever went, unless it was some bold prospector, looking for precious metal.

Several hours after nightfall the men rode into a shallow stream which crossed the trail, but turned up the canyon through which it flowed, and held on for half a mile or more, when they came to a larger canyon in which was a camp.

So secluded was the spot, so difficult of access, and so far remote from the camps, that it certainly was a most secure hiding-place for outlaws.

Ned had been gagged, blindfolded and bound, so that he had no idea of where he had been taken, and he seemed utterly used up by the hardships he had undergone.

His feet and hands were red and swollen, from the ropes about them, his tongue was inflamed and parched, through being gagged, and his eyes ached after the bandage was removed.

He saw about him some rude shanties of brush, and half a dozen rough-looking men.

Up the canyon were two dozen fine horses, lariatied out, and Ned was sure he was in a camp of horse-thieves.

Often a fine horse had been stolen from the camps, he knew, and his uncle and Will Wright had particularly been sufferers in the loss of their best animals, and the quick eyes of the boy recognized some of the stolen property.

But Ned was glad to be no longer blindfolded, and wisely held his peace.

He was given an old suit of clothes to put on, and his bonds were removed, while he was placed by a tree and told to remain there, two large bloodhounds lying near as a guard and keeping their vicious eyes upon him.

Ned saw that the camp was wild in the extreme, and among the faces of the eight men, including the two who had captured him, he recognized several he had seen in the different mining-camps.

All were heavily armed and seemed ready to defend their stolen property to the death.

When supper was called for the new-comers, Ned was told to come to the fire and eat, a request he obeyed with alacrity.

"Say, Dan, did you have any trouble catchin' him?" asked a man, strolling up to the fire, where Ned and his two captors were eating their supper.

"No, for we got him while he was in swimmin'," answered one.

"Yer don't think it will save a row in the camps?"

"No, for all will think he's drowned."

"What will yer do with him?"

"Ther cap'n said as how we was ter keep him a couple o' days, and if he didn't come up to camp ter hang him, or shoot him."

"It's pretty hard, fer ther boy is only a kid."

"Waal, we has ter obey orders; but ef ther

cap'n kin git a big ransom fer him, it would be my idee, for gold is better than his blood."

"That's so; but it would be no easy matter to arrange the business, I kin tell yer, for if ther miners suspected ther cap'n, they'd hang him mighty quick," and the man passed in.

Ned heard all this talk about him, and yet uttered no word.

"You see what we is goin' ter do with yer, kid," said one of the men, provoked that Ned had shown no fear.

"That's bluff," was the cool rejoinder of the boy.

"Bluff?"

"Yes."

"What's bluff?"

"That you intend to hang me, for you won't."

"Why won't we?"

"You are afraid to do so."

"Afraid of what?"

"The boys in camp, for they are down on you now, as horse-thieves, and if they thought I wasn't drowned, and knew you had me here, they'd soon get me free, while, if you killed me, then they'd make these mountains too hot for you."

"You talk big for a small one," said one of the men.

"I tell the truth."

"You think we is horse-thieves?"

"I know it."

"How does you?"

"I'm no fool."

"That's sart'in."

"I see enough to convince me just what you are."

"You sees too much, and I guess it will be wise to kill yer arter all."

"You won't dare do it," was the plucky response of the boy.

"You crows now, but jist wait and see whether the cap'n comes up, as he said, and if he don't, then you hangs," and with this threat the man arose.

Then a pair of old handcuffs were put on Ned's wrists, a chain attached to a tree, kept him from walking off, while the two bloodhounds lying near, were a menace against his doing so, had he been so inclined.

A blanket was thrown to him then, and Ned was left to his misery, for he knew that he was in the power of men who would stop at no act of crime to gain their purpose, while he was well aware that the knowledge he had of them was of such a nature they meant that he should not go free to make it known.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

NED had a busy brain, and he kept it working to discover some way of escape, the moment the camp was in repose.

He knew that he was in a tight place, and that his situation was one of extreme peril, and he regretted having said anything to anger the men who had him in their power.

Rising from his blanket to look about him, he heard the threatening growl of the hounds, and he knew well there was no chance of escape for him then, so, being very tired, he wisely determined to go to sleep.

This he did, and was soon in utter oblivion of his danger and all about him.

In the morning he awoke at dawn and glanced about him.

He saw that the canyon where they were opened into a valley of half a hundred acres, which seemed to be walled in by overhanging hills.

A stream ran from a small lake into the canyon, the sides of which narrowed until the water flowed over the entire bottom, and thus would give the idea that the gulch was but the bed of the brook which tumbled over from the mountains at the further end.

Horses were in the canyon near where the camp was, but they were turned loose in the valley after sunrise, and seemed to enjoy their freedom greatly.

The men, eight in number, assembled about the camp-fires and prepared breakfast, and Ned, being freed of his irons on one wrist, had the one still confined chained to the collar of one of the hounds, and was thus told to come and get something to eat.

"What's the cap'n got ag'in' you, lad, that he sends you here?" asked one of the men, in a tone of sympathy.

"Do you refer to my uncle, Captain Oliver?" asked the boy.

"No; I mean Cap'n Jack Hollis."

"Oh! he had me nabbed, then?" said Ned, his eyes opening upon the mystery of his capture.

"Shet up, Doc, and don't give the snap away,"

said one of the men, and the man addressed kept silent.

Ned was hungry, and ate heartily, sharing his breakfast with the dog to which he was chained, until one of the men told him to stop it, adding:

"Yer thinks yer kin git friendly with Tear 'Em, boy, by feedin' him, so yer kin escape, but it's no use."

Ned saw that his motive was understood, so the dog got no more food then.

Thus the day passed away, the boy captive being allowed to wander about the canyon, still chained to Tear 'Em, while Growler trotted by his side also.

Ned gave up hope of immediate escape, until he could win the friendship of the two dogs, and he devoted his every energy to this purpose, petting them, talking to them, and stealing food to give them.

"I guess we'll be friends in a week or so, and I can skip off," he said, when he went to rest that night.

The next day, however, the poor boy discovered that something was going wrong.

One of the men had left camp early in the morning and returned before sunset, and he evidently brought some important news, for all the band gathered about him and cast glances toward Ned as they talked.

"It's a shame, anyhow, and I'll not take a hand in it," Ned heard the man they called Doc say.

"Well, I'd a little rather he were a man, I admits, but then orders o' ther cap'n has ter be obeyed," another remarked.

"Well, if its got ter be did, let's git over with it durned quick," a third said.

"We'll see his ghost in this canyon ever after."

"Waal, let's git it done and say no more."

All these remarks Ned had overheard, and then Doc came toward Ned and said:

"My boy, the cap'n sent you here to git even with yer, and we expected him here to-day to say what was to be done with you."

"But one of the boys went to the camps, and he says he has his reasons for not coming just now, and that you is to be hanged!"

"Oh, no!" cried Ned, and his face became very pale.

"It's a durned shame, boy, and I says so; but the boys is set on carrying out the cap'n's orders, and I can do nothing, so I goes away into the canyon yonder, where I can't see 'em murder you."

"Good-by, boy, and if a bad man does ask it, I hope God will bless you!"

The man grasped Ned's hand as he spoke, while the boy pleaded earnestly:

"Oh, don't let them hang me, sir, please don't!"

"I wish I could help it, lad," and Doc hastened away, as though fearing to trust himself further with the poor boy, as he would be tempted to make some desperate attempt to save him.

As for the rest of the band, they seemed not to suffer with any such compunctions of conscience, and they came toward him in a body, the one who seemed to be the leader, in the absence of the captain saying abruptly:

"Come, boy, we has orders to string you up!"

"Oh, sir, what have I done that you should kill me?" cried Ned, trying to be brave and firm.

"You and the cap'n fer that, kid; but we has orders to hang you, and we must do it!"

Ned realized that they were not trying to frighten him, and he made up his mind, if he must die, he would die like a man.

His experience of the past year had taught him self-control, in a wonderful degree, for one of his years, and he was determined that the wicked men about him should see that he was not a coward, so he said:

"You can hang me, for you are men, and I am but a boy, in your power; but my uncle and the miners, will make you suffer for this."

"Never mind your uncle, boy, for we hain't afeerd o' him; but we does have to mind the cap'n, so up you goes," and the leader threw a noose about the boy's neck.

Then his hands were handcuffed behind his back, and the end of the rope was thrown over a limb, and four men took hold of it.

"Now, boy, you better say your leedle prayer, for the cap'n has said it and you has got to hang," said the leader.

Ned made no reply, and though his face was livid, he showed no sign of fear, and his form did not quiver.

He stood there, facing death, a boy before his

murderers, and waited for the word to end his young life.

Suddenly the men started, for they heard a sound down the canyon.

The next moment a horseman appeared in view, coming along through the shallow stream and urging his horse hard.

"It's Nick Sloan!" a man cried, and, as the horseman came near he waved his hands wildly and cried in stentorian tones:

"Hold on thar, pard! Don't yer hang thet boy."

The men looked at each other, while the blood rushed back into Ned's face at the joy he felt.

"Pards, the cap'n's in a hole, and ef thet boy hed been hanged up, I tell yer thar would hev been ther same leedle game played on Jack Hollis, and me too, ef I'd been fool enough ter go back."

"Give me ther kid, fer I has come fer him, and maybe it won't be long afore ther cap'n and me is back among yer ter stay."

Nick Sloan then told how matters were in the mines, and Ned being blindfolded, and bound, he was mounted on a horse and rode away with the one who had saved his life by coming just in the nick of time.

CHAPTER X. NED'S STRATEGY.

NICK SLOAN was anxious to arrive in the mining-camps after all the men had retired, so did not hurry himself up in the return with Ned, who felt just a contrary desire, being most anxious to reach home.

It was a couple of hours after midnight therefore, when Nick Sloan rode up to the Wright House with his charge.

Will Wright answered to his call, along with Fred Oddie, and they greeted Ned with a welcome he had not expected.

"Now, pard, me and Jack kin skip, can't we?" said Nick Sloan anxiously, addressing Will Wright.

"Yes, and if either of you are caught in these mining-camps again, I will put the Vigilantes on your trail, and you know what that means," was the significant response.

"Will yer bring Jack out, pard, and we'll git off suddint, I promises yer; but yer hasn't fergot yer promise ter give me a stake?"

"No, and here it is, a hundred dollars, and you do not deserve it."

"Mr. Wright, I think I ought to have the horse I rode back, on account of the scare they gave me," said Ned.

"You shall have him Ned, and I'd serve these fellows right if I made them walk."

"But Jack hain't got no horse, and he'll hev ter ride ther one you rid back ag'in, sonny," whined Nick Sloan.

"Yes, Ned, let him take the horse, for he don't seem to be of much use, and I'll give you a fine animal," said Will Wright.

"No, sir, that horse just suits me, and he can take another in its place," and Ned touched Will Wright slyly in a way that made him feel that the boy had some purpose in view, so he said:

"All right, Ned, I'll give Hollis an old beast in his stead, and you shall have this one."

Jack Hollis was then led out of the room in which he had been imprisoned, and an inferior animal being gotten for him from the hotel stable, he was told to mount, which he did quickly.

"Now you two men turn your backs on these camps, and woe be unto you if you ever return."

"Go!" said Will Wright sternly, and they started off at a gallop, Jack Hollis silent and revengeful.

"Pard, we might as well take away some good horseflesh with us," suggested Nick Sloan, as they got out of sight of the hotel.

"You are right, Nick; we kin strike old Oliver's camp, and then make a circuit round to our retreat by the North Pass, and get almost there by sun-up," was the answer, and they wheeled off to the left and made for the Oliver camp, near which the captain's horses were corraled.

In the mean time Ned had turned to Will Wright and said:

"Mr. Wright, do you know why I wanted this horse?"

"No, Ned, but I thought you had a good reason when you touched me as you did."

"This horse knows the way to the camp of Jack Hollis."

"Well?"

"I was blindfolded going there, and coming back, but we came by the Silver trail, I know, and if we start in that direction, the horse will take us to the retreat."

"Do you wish to go back there, Ned?"

"Yes, sir, but I want about twenty good miners with me, for there are eight men there,

and Jack and Nick, who have gone there, will make ten."

"Ah! I understand you now, I think."

"I wish to capture the horse-thieves, sir, and get the animals they have there—and more, there is a good deal of booty in their camp, for they are road-agents as well."

"Ned, you are a brick, and I will get a dozen good men together, while you go over to your uncle's camp, report your coming back in safety, and tell him to come here with as many more miners as I have, and we will start."

"He shall be our captain, and you shall be our guide, and ride this horse your strategy caused us to hold on to."

Ned was delighted, and hastened over to his uncle's camp, awakening him from a sound sleep.

But he got a glad welcome, and quickly told his story, when Tom was called up and ordered to run to a dozen cabins and request the miners to come, mounted and armed, at once to their captain's camp.

This Tom did, but when he went to get his master's horse for him, he found that the corral had been visited and four fine animals had been run off.

But another horse was secured, and Captain Oliver, accompanied by Ned, and followed by fifteen brave miners, rode over to the log house hotel, where Will Wright with twelve more men awaited them.

Ned was greeted upon all sides, as though from the dead, and taking the lead, mounted upon the horse he had ridden from the outlaws' retreat, the whole party set off upon the raid upon the horse-thieves.

They pushed on at a rapid pace, and just at dawn the horse ridden by the young guide turned into the stream coming down the canyon, instead of crossing it.

All followed closely, now riding four abreast, and the sun was just rising and lighting up the canyon when they came in view of the camp.

A few men were standing about, having just arisen, and hearing the horses approaching through the water, evidently thought that it was Nick Sloan and the captain coming, for, having taken the long way round, they had not put in an appearance yet.

But a yell of terror went up from the outlaws, as they beheld the cavalcade emerge from the stream, and they rushed for their weapons, at the same time shouting to their still sleeping comrades.

"Charge!"

The word rung out from the leader of the miners, and with yells the horsemen charged the camp.

Then followed rapid shots, oaths, cries, and the firing ceased, for three of the horse-thieves were prisoners, while the others were slain, though not until several of the miners had fallen, one killed and half a dozen wounded.

Gathering up the stolen horses from the valley, and the booty, the triumphant miners started upon their return, carrying their prisoners with them.

The dead they had buried where they fell, but these three men were reserved for the rope.

Sending a man in ahead to call the camps together, the miners were greeted with wild shouts from hundreds of throats as they returned to the Wright Hotel, and Ned was made a hero of and praised for his part in the valuable capture.

In those days trials of horse-thieves were dispensed with, and the three prisoners were quickly strung up to a tree, and left hanging as a warning to others who might be inclined to go wrong, while a general holiday was declared through the camps.

In the excitement, the loss of Captain Oliver's four horses was forgotten, and the escape of Jack Hollis and Nick Sloan, who had evidently become aware of the attack on their camp and made good their flight to other parts where they were unknown.

In the following spring a train of miners came into the camp, and Spitfire Pete was their guide; and it did not require much urging on his part to cause Ned to decide to accompany him on his next trail eastward and back again, especially as the old man said:

"I tells yer, boy pard, I is goin' ter take a train out ter ther Colorado gold-mines, whar yaller metal is far more plenty than silver is here."

"I'll take keer o' yer, Neddie, and yer'll hev a chance ter see ther kentry; and I sh'u'dn't wonder ef yer c'u'd strike it rich thar yerself."

Ned was not long in securing his uncle's permission, and when old Spitfire Pete started upon his return, the boy accompanied him.

CHAPTER XI.
THE YOUNG MINER.

EASTWARD, as far as Council Bluffs, Ned went with his old friend, Spitfire Pete, and there they found that the train, which the guide had to take westward to the Colorado gold-fields, was making up in Kansas City.

So thither they went, making the ride through a country at that time infested with roving bands of hostile Indians.

Ned enjoyed the trip immensely, however, and did not seem to care in the least for the several little skirmishes they had with the red-skins, for his confidence in Pete was unbounded, while the old guide was wont to say:

"I tell yer, Ned, I dunno any man I w'd rather hev back me in a scrimmage than you, unless it might be thet rattlin' Injun-fighter and scout, Buffalo Bill, and he are worth any half a dozen men I ever seen."

"You know Buffalo Bill then?" asked Ned, who had heard of the young scout of that name, who was winning such a name on the border.

"Waal now my old bones would be a bleach-in' on ther pararer ef I didn't know him, Boy Pard, fer he came up one day when I were corraled by Injuns and, just yanked me out o' death's jaws, and he were all alone too."

"Them reds seen him comin' too, but they counted on him fer one man, yer see, so wasn't much disturbed; but Lordy, they begun ter count him over again arter he got in among 'em and they concluded he were too many fer them, so they just got away like they was anxious, and he laughed, and says ter me in a pleasant way:

"I say, old pard, they was a-workin' yer rather lively, I guess."

"I crawled out o' ther hole on ther pararer, whar I was hidin', along behind o' my dead horse, not ther one I are ridin' now, Neddie, and says I:

"Who in thunder is you, pard?"

"Men calls me Buffalo Bill," he says with a sweet smile.

"Says I:

"I hes heerd o' yer, pard, from 'way back, and my grip is yourn onto death."

"He laughed again, and we was pards from that day and I are his ter command, Ned."

"But I tells yer he are some in a fight, as dangerous as a bull-dog and as pretty as a picter."

Ned was delighted at the story he had heard of the great scout, and hoped to meet him in Kansas City; but in this he was disappointed, as Buffalo Bill was then away at some army fort on the frontier.

The train was ready to depart, soon after the arrival of the old and young guide in Kansas City, and so it pulled out on its way to the Colorado gold mines, those who composed it, most anxious to be at work digging for the precious yellow metal.

In due time the train reached Denver, after an eventful pull across the country, and Ned had won renewed fame as a rifle and pistol shot, for it was hard indeed to find his equal with either weapon.

Arriving at Denver the miners spread about in search of gold, and old Pete laid out a plan for Ned to follow, telling him that he was sure he would "strike it rich" some time.

Ned was seized with the gold fever, and readily followed the advice of the old guide, to devote a few months to prospecting, while Spitfire Pete returned with an Eastbound train intending to return to Denver with the next one coming West.

Ned readily got a few of the miners to help him build a little log cabin, and, then securing a hunter's outfit, he set out daily upon prospecting tours through the adjacent mountains.

One day he shot an antelope that fell far up the side of a mountain, and climbing up to him, he was so tired out when he got to his game, that he threw himself down to rest.

Right by his side was a little hole, a water-wash in the rocky hill, and in it he saw something with a yellow hue, which he quickly seized upon, for the boy had seen enough of the precious dust to know gold when he saw it.

A cry of delight broke from his lips, and the antelope was forgotten, while he dug down into the "pocket" and dragged out the grains of gold.

"Old Spitfire said I'd strike it rich some day, and I have."

"Why, he'll be as glad as I am," he said excitedly, and then added:

"This beats Uncle Jack all to pieces."

Out of the pocket he got a goodly sum, and then prospecting about on the hillside, he found

that there were others near, some scantily provided with gold, and a few quite generously supplied.

Throwing his treasure into his canvas bag, he shouldered the choice cuts of the antelope and started for camp, distant several miles.

He kept his "find" a secret, however, well knowing the danger of making it known, as there were many bad men among the miners, who would kill him for a few hundreds in gold; but he ascertained enough to know that he was a thousand dollars better off than he had been that morning.

The next day bright and early Ned started for his mine, as he now called the whole mountain where he had struck such luck, and he worked hard all day, though with indifferent success.

Thus it went on for months, the young miner sometimes finding a considerable sum, and then for days panning out almost nothing.

Still his little store gradually increased, until he knew that he possessed quite a snug fortune, and he was anxious for Spitfire Pete's coming that he might tell him his good luck and share it with him.

One day a Pony Express rider came into the camps, and reported that a train was coming, consisting of nearly a hundred miners, and that their guide, known as Spitfire Pete, had mysteriously disappeared three nights before.

This was enough for Ned, and he questioned that pony rider until he got all the particulars he could glean from him, and mounting his horse, set forth that night in search of the train.

He pushed on rapidly, and the next day at noon came in sight of the train, and at once sought the guide in charge, and the one who had taken old Spitfire's place.

"Where's Spitfire Pete, Harry?" he asked, recognizing the man as one who had been with the old guide on their trip out.

"Lor", Ned, but I'm glad ter see yer, boy; but I can't tell yer no more about Pete than that he rode out o' camp three days ago, and none of us has seen him since."

"But did you not go and search for him, Harry?" indignantly asked the boy.

"No, though I wanted to; but I'm the only guide along, and the miners just said I should not leave camp, so I was forced to stay."

"Was Pete mounted?"

"Yas, and armed."

"At your third camp back?"

"Yas, Ned; but don't go and make a fool o' yourself a-lookin' for him, for Injuns and road-agents are lively on this trail now, and you'll git picked up sart'in."

"I shall risk it, for I wish to know what has happened to poor old Pete."

"Killed, like as not."

"Well, I should like to know if he has been."

"Good-by, Harry, and I hope to bring you news of Spitfire, when I see you in Denver, or Central," and the brave boy, true as steel to the old guide who had been his friend, started off on the trail left by the train, while Trailer Harry remarked to some of the miners, who asked him who the boy was:

"That are Ned Oliver, a boy in years, but with ther narve of a man, and he kin shoot, trail and fight with any of 'em, and ef he don't find old Pete, then thar is no use fer others ter try."

CHAPTER XII.

THE LONE TRAIL.

WHEN thrown wholly upon his own resources, Ned found that the training which Spitfire Pete had given him, served him well.

He had studied prairie craft as hard as had ever book-worm pored over his studies, and the boy had become really a wonderful trailer for his years.

He had pressed his horse hard, but anxious to find the trail of Spitfire Pete, where he had left the train, before it should be obliterated, he felt that both himself and the fine animal he rode must suffer.

For this reason he held on along the broad trail left by the train, until he could no longer see it in the darkness, and then went into camp.

Looking after the comfort of his horse first, he found him a good feeding-place, gave him water, and then rubbed him down until he knew that the animal could not but be greatly refreshed.

Then he ate his humble supper in darkness, wrapped himself in his blanket, and was soon asleep.

He awoke before dawn, watered his horse, gave him another good rubbing down, and, after

a light breakfast, mounted and struck the trail just as it was light enough for him to see it.

At a rapid pace he followed it, and, as the train was making but twenty-five to thirty miles a day, he came upon the camp at noon, from whence Spitfire Pete had disappeared.

To find the trail of the missing guide was no easy matter, but he succeeded in at last striking it, and then he sought rest for himself and horse.

Feeling that he could then treat himself to a good dinner, as his horse was faring well, he broiled some game he had shot, roasted a potato Trailer Harry had given him, with some other provisions, boiled some coffee, and enjoyed a sumptuous repast, for the prairie.

Then he saddled his horse and pressed on along the faint trail left by old Pete.

It was near sunset when he came in sight of a timber motte, and seeing an object moving about in it, he came quickly to a halt.

The guide's trail led directly to the timber, and Ned gazed earnestly to see what it was that he saw moving about.

Suddenly there came into view a horse, and a glance was sufficient for the boy to see that the animal was saddled and bridled.

"It is Pete's horse, and he is there," cried the boy, and heedless of danger he spurred forward.

Dashing into the timber, he heard several frightened snorts, and saw two other horses, which he recognized as Indian ponies.

Instantly he drew rein, and, rifle in hand, waited and watched.

The three horses, at first startled by his coming, resumed their grazing, and Ned rode forward slowly, to suddenly hear a savage yelp, then growls, and behold a dozen coyotes dash away from the dead body of an Indian which they were devouring.

Further on were the remains of another Indian, torn to pieces by the wolves, and in a clump of trees Ned beheld a form he well knew.

It was Old Spitfire Pete.

Dead?

No!

But he lay up against a tree, and near his feet was a third Indian, dead.

Ned saw that the old guide was breathing heavily, and groaning, and yet in his hands he clutched a revolver, as he lay back against the tree.

Springing from his horse he ran toward him, calling out:

"Pete! old man, Pete! I have come to save you."

The eyes slowly opened and rested upon the boy.

The face was worn and haggard, and the clothing was stained with blood in several places.

"Pete! Pete! don't you know me?" cried the boy, kneeling by his side.

"Water!" gasped the old man.

Ned took his canteen from his saddle and getting fresh water from a spring not far away, he brought it and held it to the parched lips.

Then he bathed the haggard, grizzly face tenderly, and said:

"Pete, I am Ned; don't you know me?"

"I do, boy."

"You had a fight here in the timber, and were wounded?"

"Yes."

"But I have come to save you."

"Too late."

"No, no, you'll pull through all right."

The man made no reply for a moment and then asked:

"What are you doing here, boy?"

"The Pony Express Rider brought news of your disappearance from the train, and I came to look you up."

"I took your trail, after Trailer Harry told me where to find it, and here I am."

"Just like you, Ned."

"Come, let me fix up your wounds, Pete, and you'll soon be able to go back."

"No."

"I have, as you said I would, struck it rich, and I guess I've got three thousand dollars hidden away for us."

"Too late."

"No, no, it is not too late, for you'll brace up now."

"No, I'm gone."

"Where are you wounded?"

"Three times, and, maybe, years ago, they wouldn't be so bad, but I'm old now, and have had some hard knocks, so I must go."

"Don't talk so, Spitfire," and the boy's eyes filled with tears.

"Lordy, boy, I'd 'a' died in an hour or so more, if you hadn't come; but I'll last longer now."

"Yer see I've been shootin' wolves, for I didn't want ter be eat up while alive."

"You got some red game, too," said Ned, alluding to the three Indians.

"Yes, I rid inter this timber, and they jumped me onexpected; but though I is called fer, they went ahead o' me."

"Thar is three of 'em, Ned, and one o' ther ponies I kilt."

"But you take ther critturs, and mine, when I is gone."

His voice had become husky, and so Ned gave him more water to drink, and it revived him.

Then he asked:

"Can I give you something to eat, Pete?"

"No! don't waste yer pervisions, boy, for yer is a long way from camp; and it are no use ter feed me with grub now."

Still Ned made a fire and prepared a cup of coffee, broiled an antelope steak, and tried to give it to the guide to eat.

But Spitfire Pete was too near death's threshold to swallow food, and, after the excitement of seeing Ned had passed, he began to sink rapidly.

"Ned, you know my brother's name and address, in Boston, so write him how I died, and send him the papers you find on my body; but the money keep for me, from I wish to leave you something, boy."

Night had now come on, but Ned threw wood on the fire and it blazed up brightly.

Then he caught the guide's horse and Indian ponies and lariatied them out, and coming back sat down by the side of the dying man.

The wolves howled mournfully off in the timber, and it was certainly a sad scene for the youth to be an actor in; but he bore up well, grasped the hand of the old guide, heard his last whispered farewell, and then knew that he was alone with the dead.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BOY SAMARITAN.

It was a sad, a bitter experience, for poor Ned, there alone with the dead man whom he had learned to love as a father.

Once he had said to old Spitfire:

"Don't you think I should call you father, for you are like a father to me?"

"No, boy, call me Pete, or Spitfire, for those who had the right to call me father are dead," was the answer.

There, with the dead, with the wolves howling about him, the boy sat for an hour or more.

Then he aroused himself, fired several shots into the pack of wolves, to scatter them, and throwing more wood and brush upon the fire, soon had a cheerful blaze.

He knew his danger, if roving bands of Indians were about and should see the firelight, so determined to work with a will.

He had a hatchet strapped to his saddle, and, seeking a gully began to dig down into it as rapidly as he could, and it was not very long before a grave shaped itself out of the soft earth.

From the body of the old guide he then took all that he found, in the way of papers, money and arms, and placed them in his saddle pocket.

Then he wrapped the body in the worn blankets which poor Spitfire had carried for a long time, and placed it gently in the grave, which he rapidly filled up, and trod down hard, placing layers of poles which he had cut, over it, to prevent the wolves from digging out the earth.

When he had filled in the dirt, he brought logs, sticks and brush, which were to be found in abundance in the timber and piled them up over the grave.

These he set fire to, with the remark:

"This pile will burn for two or three days, and the earth will be baked so hard the wolves can never tear to pieces the body of poor Spitfire."

Having completed his work, Ned collected the horses, Pete's and the two Indian ponies, and rode away from the timber.

He had gone scarcely a mile when he caught sight of a dark object moving against the sky.

Instantly he halted and watched carefully, while over a rise of the prairie passed a number of forms, and they were moving slowly toward the motte where the fire burned so brightly.

"Indians!" muttered Ned.

He knew his danger, and that the neighing of one of his horses would betray him.

They were only a hundred yards away, and were advancing toward the timber.

"I'm lucky I didn't stay there all night," said Ned, and he felt his knees quivering against his saddle-skirts as he counted the Indians.

Silent, and darkly visible only, they passed over the rise of the prairie, and he counted twenty-one.

When the last had gone he gave a sigh of deep relief, and then rode on once more, going at a canter, the led horses following readily.

"They can't trail me by night, I guess, and I'll be a long way off by night," he muttered, and he held on steadily, feeling a regret that his own good horse had not had a longer rest, for he had pushed him hard since leaving the mining-camps.

It was just dawn when he came to a clump of timber, and knowing that there was water near the horses pushed on rapidly.

As he dismounted, Ned gave a sudden start, for there, not ten feet from him, lay an Indian.

It was not a dead Indian, either, but a live one, crouching on the ground, with knife in hand, as though ready for a spring upon the boy.

Ned got his rifle round and leveled in an instant.

But he did not pull trigger, for the Indian made no hostile demonstration, only remained in that same attitude.

Ned saw that he was a Ute, a few of which tribe he had seen as prisoners, and he knew them to be the bitter foes of the whites.

That he was a chief he knew by his superb rig, and why he did not spring upon him Ned's quick eye at once discovered, for there was blood on the ground, and he saw that the red-skin's leg was broken.

Instantly he lowered his rifle, put aside his belt of arms, and held up his hands in token of peace between them.

The Indian laid his knife down, but within reach, and said in broken English:

"Pale-face young warrior brave."

"I wish to help you, for I would not harm a wounded Indian," answered Ned, and he walked boldly up to the red-skin.

"Me great chief; me Ute; name Bad Cloud; leg broke," said the red-skin, by way of introduction.

"Where are your braves?" asked Ned, glancing about him anxiously.

"All gone; pale-face fight Ute camp; wound Bad Cloud; braves fly, leave me."

Ned then looked at the Indian's leg and saw that it was broken by a bullet, and had evidently been done early in the night just past.

He gleaned from the Ute that he was chief of a band of half a hundred warriors on the war-path, and their camp had been surprised by United States cavalry.

He had been wounded, as had also his pony, and had made his escape, his horse having fallen out on the prairie half a mile distant, when he had crawled to the timber, and was making for the spring when he saw the youth approaching.

His bow and arrows he had lost, also a rifle, which was with his pony, as he had no ammunition for it, and he certainly expected Ned to kill him.

"No; women, children and sick folks, I am not bloodthirsty toward," said Ned, and he helped the red-skin to the spring, and, after staking the horses out, set to work to dress the wound.

It was an ugly wound, but the chief stoically told Ned how to search for the ball, and under his direction it was found and extracted.

Then gathering some herbs which Bad Cloud pointed out to him, Ned made a bandage of them about the wound, and then strengthened the leg with splints.

He then sprung upon an Indian pony and rode off to where the chief's horse lay dead, and brought away his rifle and trappings, after which he built a fire and cooked breakfast.

With his own supplies and those of Spitfire Pete and the Ute's, Ned had ample provisions for some days, and he made up his mind, anxious as he was to get back to the mining-camps, he would not desert the wounded Indian.

Thus the day passed away, the horses resting and getting plenty of juicy grass and cool water, and the boy and the Indian seeming to become good friends, as the hours went by.

Lying with his leg placed in the easiest position possible, the Ute watched every movement of the boy, seeming to hardly realize that he really meant well toward a foe.

As for Ned, he felt little dread of the red-skins now, for if any visited the timber they would doubtless be Utes, and he could not believe that after all he had done for the chief he would allow his braves to harm him.

As the sun drew near the horizon, Ned washed and dressed the wound again, placed fresh herb-leaves upon it, and gave the chief a substantial supper, sharing his coffee with him.

"Young pale-face great brave—Bad Cloud his friend, he friend of Bad Cloud," said the chief as night came on and Ned, putting out the fire so as not to attract attention from any one that might pass near, lay down to sleep.

CHAPTER XIV.

DEFENDING A FOE.

It is said that the Indians are natural surgeons and medicine-men, and certainly the skill which the Ute chief had shown in directing Ned how to dress his wound, and the herb-leaves he had applied, were of great good, for the next morning the inflammation was not so great, and Bad Cloud said that he suffered less pain.

"What boy have do with Bad Cloud now?" asked the Ute, after he had eaten the hearty breakfast which Ned had given him.

"You can't ride, chief?"

"No."

"If you could I would take you to your people."

"No take chief to pale-face to kill?"

"No, I would not do that, unless I caught you in a square fight."

"Take Bad Cloud to his people, yes?"

"I would if you could ride; but as you cannot, I suppose I can only stay here and take care of you until you are able to go."

"It long time."

"Yes, a month, I fear, perhaps longer."

"Yes, long time."

"We can do nothing else."

"Me tell."

"Well, chief?"

"Make travois, for Indian pony yonder."

Ned did not fully understand, and, in his limited English, Bad Cloud explained that the Indians carried their sick and wounded, their little children and the baggage on travois.

Under the direction of the chief, Ned cut down two long saplings, trimmed them of the branches and leaves, and flattened off the large ends.

He then made a harness with the Indian lariats, to fit a horse, and attached it to the small ends of the poles.

Some seven feet from the small ends of the poles, he put a brace, three feet long, and another near the larger ends. Cutting small saplings, an inch or two in diameter, he laid them upon these braces, like the slats on a bed, and tied them there firmly.

Then he placed the Indian's blanket and trappings upon it until he had made a comfortable bed, upon which he aided the chief, placing him in a position that was very easy.

Into the shafts with the harness he put one of the Indian ponies, which he had brought from the motte where Spitfire had died, and with the traps and arms packed upon the guide's horse, started off on the trail to the Ute camp, the chief telling him how to go.

The other Indian pony was led behind the travois, to take his place in the shafts when his comrade was tired.

Thus the strange cavalcade started off on the march, Ned riding ahead to lead the way, the dead guide's horse following as a pack-animal, then the pony drawing the travois that held the wounded chief, and the other Indian horse bringing up the rear.

It was slow traveling, and but a dozen miles had been made when night came on, and they went into camp in a very comfortable place.

Ned did not for a moment neglect the wounded Indian, but dressed his wound most carefully and was glad to know that he had suffered no pain from the journey.

The next morning at sunrise they started again on the march, Ned hoping to reach the foot-hills by night, where he trusted they would find some Ute warriors, to whom he might yield up their wounded chief.

As they halted at noon, after fifteen miles having been made, Ned's keen eye saw objects in the distance he did not like.

They were upon the banks of a small stream, and in the shelter of some willows; but the trail led near, and those he beheld, far out on the prairies, were horsemen, and coming directly toward where they then were.

As they drew near, Ned was rejoiced to find that they were whites, while the Ute seemed correspondingly oppressed, saying bluntly:

"Pale-face kill chief."

"No, they won't," was the firm response of the boy.

"Yes, boy don't know."

Ned, however, did not anticipate trouble, and as the party drew near he recognized Trailer Harry, the guide of the train, and saw that he had with him a dozen miners, all well mounted and armed.

Trailer Harry had seen something moving among the willows, and had halted his party, when Ned walked out upon the prairie and waved his sombrero.

Instantly the men set up a yell, and came galloping toward him, and throwing themselves from their horses, they pressed about him, warmly grasping his hands.

"I'm on yer trail, Pard Ned, for I wasn't goin' ter hev yer eat up by Injuns, as they is not on the war-path now, and I jist got some o' ther boys to jine me and look yer up!" said Trailer Harry.

"You are very good, Harry; but I found poor Spitfire!" Ned replied.

"No."

"Yes, I found him in a timber motte about twenty miles from your wagon trail."

"Dead?"

"No, but dying."

"Go long! the Injuns had kilt him?"

"Yes," and Ned told all that had happened up to that time.

"And whar is yer Ute chief, Ned?" asked one of the miners.

"Over yonder in the willows."

"Come, pards, we'll string him up!" cried one, and all started for the willows.

But Ned ran on ahead, and when he reached the *travois*, in which lay the Ute, silent, calm, defiant, he turned around and said:

"Here he is, pards, and, as you see, he is badly wounded."

"Sarved him right; but he's not hurt too bad to hang."

"You must not harm him," Ned said boldly.

"What does yer mean, little pard?"

"Just what I say; you shall not harm this Indian!"

All were amazed, and they gazed at Ned and each other inquiringly.

"Leetle pard, does yer sit yerself up ag'in' us?" asked the man who had before spoken.

"Yes, if you mean to harm this Indian."

"We means to hang him, and right now."

Ned looked troubled and he said, pleadingly:

"Pards, I don't love Indians, and especially since they killed poor Spitfire; but I found this one wounded, and but for me he would have died."

"I told him I would take him to his people, and I mean to do so."

"You is a imperdent kid ter talk so, and I've a mind ter lick yer, arter I hes hanged the Injun."

"Don't you try it on, Ben Hayes, to do either," and Ned's eyes flashed fire.

"I'll do it, boy. Come on, pards!"

But Ben Hayes stopped short as a revolver was suddenly thrust before his face.

"You attempt to hang that wounded Indian, Ben Hayes, and I'll kill you!" said Ned, in a low, quivering voice.

A cheer broke from the miners at the boy's pluck, and Trailer Harry stepped forward and said:

"Ben, give in, for it's Ned's Injun, and you hain't got no say about him, and he kin take him to his tribe if he wants to be a durned fool, only I advises him not ter do it."

The others sided with Trailer Harry, and Ben Hayes was forced to yield; but all advised Ned to give the Ute one of the ponies and let him go.

"No, his leg is broken and he cannot ride, and I promised him I would see him to his camp, and I'll do it."

"I'm much obliged to all you boys for coming to look me up, and I would like to go back with you, only I cannot; but I'll come in before long."

"Never; you'll be scalped sart'in."

Such, and other arguments were brought to bear against Ned's carrying out his design; but he remained firm, and, after being given some fresh provisions, he departed with the wounded chief, the miners under Trailer Harry returning to the mines.

CHAPTER XV.

AMONG THE RED-SKINS.

It was a case of: "I told you so!" when long weeks and months passed away among the gold-miners, and Ned did not put in an appearance.

Trailer Harry, after waiting for some time, and the youth not coming in, organized a party and started in search of him.

They went to the place where they had parted with him and seen him ride off with the wounded Ute.

The travelers had left a trail which was still discernible, and they followed it to the hills—but beyond that no trace of the boy could be found,

and after a long scout they were forced to go back without any word of him.

They all hoped that they would find him in camp upon their return, but this they were disappointed in, and all gave up the boy as lost.

One day, several months after Ned's disappearance, a man from the Nevada mines appeared, searching for the boy.

He told how anxious his uncle and friends were about him, and, learning the story of Spitfire Pete's death, and Ned's fate, for he was supposed to be dead, he returned to Nevada to make known the sad news.

After that the boy was spoken of in the camps as Nevada Ned, and his fate was talked over night after night without coming to any solution of the mystery.

Some said that the treacherous Ute chief had killed him.

Others asserted that the chief had let him go, and envious young warriors had trailed him and put him to death.

Still more were of the belief that Ned was held a prisoner among the Indians and would some day turn up all right.

Many hoped that such would be the case, and the doubt hanging over his fate, kept Nevada Ned's name constantly the talk about the camp-fires.

All this time the subject of discussion was not dead, but he was the inmate of an Indian camp.

The chief, Bad Cloud, had seen that those who had come to rescue Nevada Ned, wished to take his life.

He understood English sufficiently well to comprehend that Ned was his defender, boldly facing all who wished to put him to death, and the boy rose still more in his estimation.

When he gained his point and they parted company with the miners, the chief felt relieved in mind, and urged Ned to hasten on at a more rapid pace.

The boy did so, and just at sunset they reached the foothills, but pushed on for a mile or so into them ere halting for the night.

Finding a good camping place, Ned built a wicky-up, for a storm was threatening, and with the Indian's blankets and saddles, made quite a snug retreat.

The horses were staked out near, a large fire of logs, as large as Ned himself, was built, and they were enjoying their supper when the storm broke with terrific fury.

The thunder and lightning were terrific, the winds shrieked among the hills, and there were many trees blown down.

But Ned had built a strong shanty, and sheltered as it was in a chasm, it withstood the strength of the tempest, and also wholly protected them from the driving rain.

The huge fire of logs burned brightly, and both Ned and the chief felt most comfortable in their retreat, and listened to the howling of the winds and heavy down-pour of the rain without dread or discomfort.

All the night through and the next day, the storm continued, and it was not until the third day that Ned was able to move on once more.

The perfect rest had however done the Indian chief a great deal of good, and he pointed out to Nevada Ned other plants that were better, as healing remedies, than the one he had used on the prairie, and these the boy skillfully dressed the wound with.

Then into the mountains they continued their march, the chief directing their way, until they struck a broad trail which Bad Cloud said led to his village.

After two days' march among the mountains, Nevada Ned came in sight of the Indian village.

"Show this," and the chief gave Ned a pole on which was the tail of a horse, dyed scarlet.

It was the insignia of rank of Bad Cloud, and waving it, Ned went toward the Indian village, followed by his strange outfit.

Instantly a great excitement was observed in the Indian village, and warriors rushed for their arms and horses, for Ned was seen to be a pale-face and was supposed to have hundreds of white men at his heels.

The wounded chief gave a long loud cry, however, and called Ned to his side, telling him to dismount.

The boy obeyed, and the cry of the chief was repeated and answered, and instantly warriors came hastening toward them.

In a few words, as they drew near, Bad Cloud told his story, which Nevada Ned did not understand, it being in the Ute tongue; but he discovered that he was the subject of it, as all eyes were turned upon him, some in wonder, others in kindness, and a few in natural hatred.

Nevada Ned bore the ordeal well, and while

the chief was being welcomed by his people, stood quietly by.

That Bad Cloud had been considered dead by his people, Ned saw, as also that the two ponies were recognized as having belonged to warriors of the tribe who had not turned up.

Ned had told Red Cloud about his friend Spitfire Pete, and how he found him dying, with three dead Indians about him, and the chief had said that they were a part of his hand.

The warriors he had led on the war-path, had returned, excepting about a dozen, who had not turned up, and three of these Ned could account for as Spitfire's game; but the others had doubtless been slain by the Cavalry which had dashed in upon Bad Cloud's camp and wounded the chief so severely.

The tribe mourned for their dead, rejoiced at the return of their chief, and bemoaned the fact that they were not allowed to kill Nevada Ned.

The chief was taken to his tent, and seeming to understand his people, he ordered that Ned should occupy it with him.

He was then turned over to the tender mercies of the medicine-men, whom Ned watched most attentively in their curative arts for their chief.

As the days passed on Ned began to pick up the Indian language, and he joined the tribe in their games.

Practicing with the bow and arrow, he soon learned to shoot with the best of them, and then he showed them his skill with the rifle and revolver until they were amazed.

Disdaining to go with the youths of the village, he accompanied the warriors on their hunts after game, learned to fish as they did, to trap birds and small game, and studied all their signs.

He made himself useful to the medicine-men of the village, and learned much from them of useful herbs, roots and plants, and how their medicines were made and given.

All this time Ned knew that he was little more than a prisoner, for the wound of the chief kept him still confined to his tepee, and he told the boy that he did not wish him to depart until he got well and could accompany him, for he said that there were evil young warriors in his tribe who would kill him.

So Nevada Ned was forced to remain for months in the Indian village, passing away there the long days of winter.

When spring came Bad Cloud was able to walk about, though his leg still gave him some trouble.

Then Ned asked him if he could not go, telling him how anxious he was to see his people.

Bad Cloud was pained, for he had hoped to wean the boy away from the whites, and to make an Indian of him.

He liked him also immensely, for he knew that he owed his life to him, and so said:

"Won't Gold Hair stay with my people?"

"No, I must go home," Ned answered.

"Gold Hair be son of Bad Cloud."

"Make big chief some day," urged the Indian.

"No, I wish to go to my people."

"Give Gold Hair lots of ponies, buffalo-robes, wolf-skins, if he stay."

"No."

"Gold Hair will go?"

"Yes."

"Bad Cloud good chief, so let Gold Hair go, but no want to say good-by," and seeing that Nevada Ned was determined to depart, he fixed a day on which he could leave, telling him he would accompany him as far as he dared toward the camps of the pale-faces.

Then the chief began to load the boy with presents.

He gave him several of his best ponies, and large quantities of buffalo and bear robes, with the skins of mountain lions, deer, wolves, foxes and beaver.

These were packed upon the ponies, along with other presents given Ned by warriors and squaws in the tribe, who had learned to like the pale-face boy who had saved the life of their chief; and one morning early the party set out to escort Gold Hair, as all called him on account of his long, golden hair, to the home of his people.

In the party were Bad Cloud and half a score of warriors, and the latter led Ned's ponies, bearing his gifts.

But Ned, though going back to the mining-camps, seemed pale and anxious.

The fact was that he had overheard a plot among the chiefs to attack the white settlements.

The Utes thought, by returning the boy with presents, it would put the pale-faces off their guard, and they planned to take him near the

lines at such a time that he would arrive in the afternoon.

Then at night hundreds of warriors would push on into the mining-camps to kill and raid all that fell in their way.

Ned had risked his life to learn this little plan, creeping up in the darkness to the council tent, and hearing all that was said.

Bad Cloud, with a dozen warriors, were to go with him to within ten miles of the settlements, and behind them a dozen miles were to follow two hundred or more mounted and well-armed warriors.

As soon as Ned had gone on his way, Bad Cloud was to ride back to join his braves, and, awaiting until night, they were to make the dash in upon the mining-camps.

It was a well-concocted scheme, and what troubled Ned was the fact that he would not be able to warn the miners in time.

But on they rode, camping one night on the way, and going by the most secret trails, until Ned told Bad Cloud that they were within a dozen miles of the nearest camp, as he recognized his surroundings.

Bad Cloud then bade the boy good-by, telling him that he was his son, though his face was white, and if his warriors ever met the pale-face no harm should ever befall him.

So Ned went on his way, his half-dozen ponies following behind, laden with his presents.

Ned also had Spitfire's horse and trappings, which he had sacredly kept, though he had been forced to give up the two ponies of the slain warriors.

Once out of sight of his Indian escort, Ned said, hastily:

"Now ponies, you have got to travel, so git!"

He urged them into a gallop, and over rough ground and smooth kept them at it.

At last the trail led him into a deep canyon, which he knew was near the mining-camps and he fired his revolver in rapid succession to give an alarm.

Turning a bend in the canyon he came suddenly upon a dozen miners, who had quickly left work at the sound of firing.

Drawing his cavalcade to a halt, Ned shouted:

"Hello, boys, how are you?"

"Nevada Ned!" came in a chorus of voices as the miners recognized the boy, after a close look, for he had greatly changed in the seven months that he had been absent.

His hair was nearly down to his waist, and of a bright golden hue, he had grown tall and as wiry as an Indian, and his face was almost as dark, while his handsome blue eyes flashed brightly.

He was dressed in Indian-tanned and made buckskin, from his moccasins up, but wore his sombrero still though it was ornamented with feathers.

In addition to his rifle and revolvers, he carried a bow and quiver of arrows at his back, and a tomahawk in his belt, while his bridle and saddle were trimmed gayly in the manner of the Indian warriors.

After a grasp of the hand all around, with those who knew him, and those who did not, Ned said quickly:

"Pards, I'm back again, and sometime I'll tell you the story; but now we have no time to lose, for there are three hundred warriors, or nearly that number, lying back in the woods, intending to attack the camps to-night."

"They'll hit here first, push on through the canyon into the valley, and so make a circuit of the camps, killing and robbing as they go, and returning to the mountains up through Central."

"Now give the alarm as quickly as possible, have the boys ready for them, and let them come into a trap they'll find it hard to get out of."

"They think by sending me back you will not expect an attack, but will believe that the chief and his dozen warriors who came with me, are the entire band; but they did not think I knew it, though I heard their entire plot."

"Now boys, you know all I can tell you, and my idea would be to let them come up this canyon to those camps and then attack them in the rear, pushing them upon the other camps that would be ready for them, and maybe you would get them all."

All listened attentively to what Ned had said, and then gave him three cheers, while one old miner, formerly an army officer said:

"Ned, one would think you had been off at West Point studying military tactics, from the advice you give, instead of being in an Indian village a prisoner."

"Captain, why don't you be chief?" cried Ned,

recognizing the officer as one who was said to have once been a major in the army and an Indian-fighter.

"Yes, you be the colonel, sir," said a miner.

"Yes, Major Drew, you be chief."

And the cry going the rounds, the miner thus called upon bowed his thanks, and, with a quickness and skill denoting a thorough military training, organized the men into a company, sent orders to the other camps for their leaders to meet him, and turning to Ned, said:

"You, my fine fellow, I wish for an *aide-de-camp*."

Ned was delighted at this honor, and taking his ponies up to his cabin in the hills, and which he found as he had left it, he quickly returned and reported for duty.

CHAPTER XVI.

SNOWED IN.

HAD Bad Cloud followed the ideas of some of our pale-face military men, and attacked in squadrons at different points, it is likely his red-skin army would have been wiped out in one night.

But as it was, the wily chief, although expecting to surprise the whites, sent a force of a dozen warriors on ahead some two hundred yards, and when these were almost annihilated by riding into an ambush, he wisely concluded that the miners were ready for him, and at once gave the order to retreat.

Finding that he was already entrapped, he knew that there was but one way out, and that was by the way he had come in; and getting his men together in a body, he rode over and through the force that had closed in on him after he had entered the canyon.

He got through with some sharp fighting, and the loss of a number of slain, though he managed, as was the Indian custom, to carry off most of his dead and all his wounded.

The retreat was a rapid one, for mounted miners, with Major Drew at their head, pursued the flying red-skins hotly.

Nevada Ned kept by the side of the major all through the fight, and his utter disregard of danger won the praise of the miners.

Whether old Bad Cloud laid it to Ned that he was not able to surprise the camps, is not known; but certain it was that he got a surprise himself, and where he had expected scalps and booty, he had to run for his life back to his village, and leave the miners the victors.

But for Nevada Ned's warning, it would have been a surprise and a most disastrous one, and the miners, wishing to show their appreciation of the service he had done them, clubbed together and got him up a most unique rig.

His broad sombrero was encircled by a chain about the outer brim, to which were hung little slugs of gold, making an odd fringe, while the band, or cord about the hat was of solid links of the precious metal.

A gold watch, found on one of the dead Indians, was presented to Ned, and with it a chain oddly made out of five-dollar gold-pieces linked together, and representing a small fortune.

Ned accepted these honors modestly, and yet it seemed to inculcate in him a desire to dress in the grandest style, and the result of it was that he sent his pistols, rifle and knife East to have them gold-mounted with metal which he forwarded with them.

Then his spurs, bridle bit, buckles and saddle ornaments were all made of gold, while he got himself up in a semi-Mexican and frontier garb that was very becoming.

Those who knew Ned humored him, for they were aware that it was a whim only, and not vanity, and his courage had been tested too often for them to look upon him as a young dandy gotten up for show.

Going to the hiding-place of his treasure, Ned found it safe, and before again commencing the arduous work of gold-hunting, he decided to make his uncle a visit, for he had heard of his having sent to Colorado to see what had become of him.

With one of his ponies loaded as a pack-horse, and mounted upon a superb spotted animal which Bad Cloud had given him, Nevada Ned, the Boy Gold King, as the miners now called him, rode off one fine morning on his long and dangerous journey to Virginia City.

There were many who predicted that he would never get there, and others that he would never return; but certain it is that one morning a youth arose from a blanket bed within a few miles of the mining-camps of Captain Jack Oliver, and, putting aside his buckskin suit, much the worse for wear, rigged himself out in his best, and mounting his horse rode on, followed by his pack-animal.

He had burnished up his gold-mounted weapons, bridle, spurs and all, and wearing his gold chain and glittering sombrero, coolly rode up to Captain Oliver's cabin unannounced.

Some one had seen the coming of the gorgeous youth and announced him with a yell that made the hills ring, and brought Captain Oliver to the door.

"How are you, Uncle Jack?"

"By all that's good! you are Ned!" cried the amazed miner.

"Yes, I'm Ned, uncle," and Ned was delighted at the impression he made, while Black Tom, coming forward, said earnestly:

"Waal, Mars' Ned, you do shine fer sart'in, that's a fact."

"You looks like a bran'-new gold-piece."

"He's ther King o' Gold, or I'm a howlin' liar," shouted a rough miner.

"Well, uncle, I've been successful as a miner, and down in Colorado they call me Nevada Ned, the Boy Gold King, so you see my old name still sticks to me."

"But how have you been, and what's the news from the old home East, and how has luck struck you?"

"You ask more questions, Ned, than a Philadelphia lawyer can in the same length of time; but, boy, I'm delighted to see you, and you must tell me all about yourself and just what you've been doing, for I've been mourning you for dead and so wrote home."

So that night Ned told of his adventures, and did it in a modest way that caused an old miner to say:

"You has done more than you 'lows you has, Ned, for you talks awful humble about yourself, while yer looks like the Chief of the Overland Road Agents."

Ned laughed, but said he came by his gold without having to turn road-agent, and hoped to dig a big fortune out of the earth before very long.

After remaining several weeks with his uncle, Ned bade him adieu, and set out upon his return for Colorado, intending to work with a will and win a fortune, ere he should see Captain Oliver again.

He went back well supplied with provisions, and having made some purchases there he was unable to get in Colorado, he took back with him two pack-horses well laden, while Turk, his faithful dog, followed at his heels.

In taking a different trail back Ned lost his way in the mountains, and after a week's wandering found that he was long miles from where he should have been.

He had pressed his animals hard, in trying to find his way, and was looking for a camping-place, as night was not far away and a storm coming with it, when he beheld a cabin ahead, under the shelter of a hill.

It was a small log structure, the door was closed, as also the shutters over the two windows, and it looked deserted.

Under the hillside were several stacks of hay, and a small log stable, while a number of chickens ran from him as he rode up, being evidently wild.

As no one answered his call, and Ned knew the place must have been deserted for months, he broke the door in and entered.

It contained two rooms, and within was a cot bed, a table, two chairs, some cooking utensils, and a few pieces of crockery.

Ned threw open the windows, for the place to air, hastily built a fire in the large chimney-place, and then looked to the comfort of his horses.

The stable was a snug one, fifty paces away, and capacious enough to accommodate his three horses.

There were some barrels filled with corn, that had been raised on a patch Ned had noticed beyond the cabin, and which had been rudely fenced in, and in the half-loft was more hay of a coarse kind.

Whoever had been the dweller in that lonely cabin had been long absent from it, and Ned, seeing that a rude wagon-way led there, and yet no vehicle or horse being visible, came to the conclusion that the owner had gone away, perhaps to the nearest camp for stores, and been killed by the Indians or torn to pieces by wolves.

Whatever his fate, his deserted home served as a refuge for Ned, and he quickly took advantage of it, for it was growing very cold and it seemed that a snow-storm was coming up.

Putting his horses in the stable and feeding them, Ned barred the door to keep out the wolves, and soon made himself comfortable in the cabin.

He ate a good supper, sharing it with Turk, and then sought the cot and went to sleep.

The storm came up and the wind howled about the cabin, but Ned was not in the least disturbed, and arose in the morning greatly refreshed.

The fire had burned low, and the cabin was very cold, so he hastened to throw on some wood, and glancing out of the window as he did so, uttered a cry of almost terror.

The whole country was knee-deep with snow. Ned stood like one struck dumb with amazement.

His uncle had urged him not to attempt to return so late in the fall, saying that the snow must soon fall; but Ned felt confident, and, against all advice, had started.

Had he taken the way back which he had come, he would have been all right, and reached his camp on time; but, anxious to learn all he could of the country, he had boldly taken a new way, got lost, and worst of all, found himself snowed-in in the mountains.

Far from any human habitation he knew that he was, excepting the hermit's hut that then sheltered him.

That his life would have soon ended, but for the lucky finding of the trail that led to that cabin, he well knew, for he could not have lived without shelter and food.

Long he stood pondering, and then, nerving himself to accept his fate, he set to work.

Turk looked up into his master's face wonderingly, and Ned said:

"Well, Turk, we are in for it, and are here for a long time, I fear, unless a thaw follows soon, and gives us a chance to go on our way."

But Turk seemed to be pleased with the fact that they were then safe, and yelped his satisfaction.

"But for this cabin, Turk, we'd soon die," and Ned built a fire with the wood at hand, and was glad to find that the next room held a good supply.

Not enough to last one-third the winter he knew, however, and he felt that he had to go to work.

As he opened the door, an elk, resting in the shelter of the cabin, bounded off; but, quick as a flash Ned seized his rifle and dropped him.

"We'll not starve right off, Turk," he said, cheerily, and went out and dragged the elk in.

Then he fed the ponies but sparingly, as he said:

"It may be six months this will have to last you, ponies, so go slow."

The chickens, half-frozen, still remained upon their roost, under a shed, and Ned determined to bag them as soon as night came, for as there were half a hundred of them he saw as many days' food ahead.

During the day the storm continued, and Ned made himself useful in setting things to rights as he wished them.

He saw plenty of wood not far off, trees that had been felled, and others that had been blown down, and an ax was in the house, so he felt no fear of freezing.

The next day the storm had ended, but the snow was three feet deep on a level and it was very cold.

With pieces of blanket he made himself some gloves, and a working coat of the same material, while he also manufactured some leggings and stout moccasins of deer hide.

Thus equipped he cleared a path through the snow to a fallen tree, and went to work with an ax.

All day he worked hard, and at night caught the chickens, killed and picked them, throwing them on the roof in the snow to freeze and keep, as he did also the elk meat.

Thus the days passed away, the snow began to disappear, and Ned hoped he would be able to venture on his way once more.

But on arising the next morning to start, he found another storm threatening, and determined not to start, though he took his rifle and went in search of game, having seen several deer in the valley below.

Mounting his horse he rode in chase of them, and readily got within range, the animals seeming to be ravenous with hunger, having been overtaken by the snow-storm before they could get to a more congenial locality.

Ned managed to kill three, and these were quickly taken to the cabin, dressed, and hung up for food.

The ponies did not seem to like their confinement any more than did Ned; but they had to put up with it as their master did, while Turk appeared perfectly contented.

A spring of water was just under the cliff, so Ned congratulated himself over and over again

upon his good luck, and sat in the doorway of his cabin that night grimly watching the approaching storm.

He had plenty of coffee and sugar, if not wasted, some crackers for an extra occasion, corn to make bread of, when he had ground it in a hand-mill he found in the house; some bacon as a relish, and which he also discovered there, salt, pepper, and in the garden-patch were onions, potatoes, beets and cabbages, none the best, as they had been planted by the former owner, and grown up uncared for; but still Ned was not in a fault-finding mood, and they would do, and he had gathered them.

As for fresh meats, he had his elk, antelope and chickens, and he had not forgotten Turk in dressing the animals.

"We are in for it, Turk; but I guess we won't starve, for if our supplies give out, we have three horses in the stable," and Ned closed the door against the freezing blasts and driving snow, and reconciled himself to what was before him.

CHAPTER XVII.

NEVADA NED'S DEADLY AIM.

To follow Ned's career through the long days and nights of that cold winter, would be but to repeat the story over of each twenty-four hours, for little change did he know.

The wolves were wont to visit him often by night, coming over the frozen snow, and Turk showed no anxiety to go out and interview them on such occasions.

Ned would practice upon them now and then, but he did not care to waste his ammunition.

His hay and meat getting low, he was forced to kill one of his ponies, to leave enough for the other two, and the boy wisely cut off from the animal some choice steaks, to put away for himself and Turk, should his supply of deer-meat give out before the snows melted.

Fortunately, however, he was only forced to make a few meals off of horseflesh, before he was able to start upon his journey.

It had seemed years to him, that long winter in that lone cabin, and he fairly yelled with delight when he mounted his thin horse, and started off one fine morning in spring, his pack-animal coming behind him at a slow pace.

Here and there green grass had sprung up, and cropping this, and with exercise, the animals picked up rapidly, while Ned was forced to do as Turk did, live on fresh meat alone.

His coffee and other provisions were all gone, his vegetables, too, and Ned said to himself:

"I never knew how much a fellow could eat in half a year until I had tried it."

It was rough traveling yet, though he had waited as long as he dared, and he made slow progress, while, not knowing exactly where he was, he had to go a great deal by guess-work.

One afternoon Ned, to his great delight, came upon a well-beaten trail.

He could see that it had been but lately traveled, and more, there were hoof-tracks that showed the iron horseshoe, proving that they were not Indians.

Still Ned was cautious, and riding into a thicket of mountain cedar, he dismounted, hitched his horse, and calling to Turk to follow him, went forward on foot to reconnoiter, convinced that he was in the vicinity of a camp of some kind, but whether the village of red-skins, or the mining-camps of pale-faces, he could not yet tell.

A growl of warning from Turk caused him to quickly seek shelter behind a huge boulder only a few steps from the trail.

As he did so a horseman came in sight, and he was leading two animals.

It was just before sunset, and the man's face was visible by the light falling full upon it, and Ned recognized the man at a glance, and just in time, for he was about to call out to him, seeing that he was not an Indian.

"It is Jack Hollis!" hoarsely whispered Ned, addressing Turk, whom he motioned to keep quiet.

"Curses on him! he sh'ud hev been here by this time!"

"Wonder if he's been nabbed?" growled the man, and his evil face worked savagely.

"You're up to some deviltry, Jack Hollis, and I hope I'll know what it is," muttered Ned, regarding his old enemy, whose one arm was a strong reminder of the boy's deadly aim.

"I've changed much in two years, grown tall, and as black as an Indian."

"Wonder if he'd know me?" and Ned was half tempted to step out from his place of concealment.

He saw that Hollis was armed well, three re-

volvers and a knife being in his belt, where he could reach them with his left hand.

His face was bearded, his slouch hat drawn down over his fierce eyes, and his look that of a man ready for any deadly work.

His horse was a fine one, as were the other two animals, and they were led by lariats caught in their bits and looped over his saddle-horn.

One of the horses carried a man's saddle, the other an old lady's saddle, and this fact the more convinced Ned that something was wrong when Jack Hollis had a hand in it.

"They say that he and Nick Sloan took to the Overland Trail as road-agents," Ned muttered, as he eyed the one-armed desperado, who had halted his horses not thirty paces from the boulder, behind which stood the young Gold King, a cedar bush hiding him completely.

"Ah! there he comes now," Jack Hollis said aloud.

Ned was on the alert now, and watched for the coming of the one the desperado waited for.

"If he don't bring the gal, he'll hev ter go back arter her—but he hes got her!"

The last words were uttered triumphantly and then Ned heard steps rapidly approaching along the trail, and a voice called out:

"I've got her, cap'n, and nobody see'd me."

"She hain't dead, be she?" asked Hollis.

"No, I has her muffled, fer she's got a voice like a bugle, and this are no place ter be caught stealin' a gal in."

"You'll hev ter carry her, fer I can't, with my one arm."

"She's got ter ride, ef I tie her on ther horse," and throwing a shawl off the head and shoulders of the one he carried, he said:

"Come, gal, yer must go with us and no screechin', unless yer wants yer throat cut."

Ned saw a young girl of eleven, with a face that, though alarmed, was very lovely to look upon.

"It is Nick Sloan that has her, and I guess it's my chip in," Ned muttered, drawing his revolver from his belt.

In answer to the rude words of her captor, who held firmly upon her hand, the young girl said, indignantly:

"Let me go, sir, or it will be the worse for you, as I have friends who will kill you for carrying me off."

"Gal, you is wuth a big fortin' to us, and we don't intend ter let yer go."

"Them fellers in ther mine will pay big money to git yer back ag'in; but if they don't, I'll raise yer as my child."

"Come, let Nick help yer on yer horse and no buckin' and screechin', fer it are unhealtly here fer us, and we'd kill yer afore we'd give yer up."

There was something in the face of Jack Hollis that told the girl, young as she was, that he meant just what he said, and she buried her face in her hands and said:

"Oh, don't carry me off, you wicked man, or I shall die!"

"Come, Nick, gag her if she's goin' ter yell!" fiercely said Jack Hollis, and in obedience to the command, Nick Sloan seized her in his arms and was wrapping the shawl about her face, when Ned stepped forth from behind the boulder.

"Nick Sloan, let that girl alone!" and as Nevada Ned spoke he fired.

Few men would have taken the chances that Nevada Ned did, in firing at the man while he held the girl in his grasp; but the boy knew well his aim, while he also saw that the desperado's eyes had caught sight of him and he was drawing a weapon, too.

A cry broke from the lips of the girl at the shot, and the arms of Nick Sloan were waved wildly in the air as he staggered back from her and fell heavily.

Whether Jack Hollis supposed there were others following the youth, or recognized Nevada Ned, or was most anxious to escape himself, is not known, but certain it is that he cast loose the lariats from over his saddle-horn, and, releasing the two animals thus, wheeled his own horse about, as though on a pivot, and went flying down the trail.

To hasten him Ned sent a bullet after him, though with no intention of hitting him, and at the report he saw Jack Hollis dig his spurs deep into the side of his horse and disappear from sight around a bend in the trail.

Nevada Ned knew that there was nothing to fear from Nick Sloan, for he had shot to kill, and his aim was true.

His bullet had crashed into the head of the desperado, and stone dead he lay as the boy stepped up to him.

"Is he dead?" asked the young girl in a whisper, gazing at Ned with as much awe as she felt for the dead form at her feet.

"Yes, miss," and Ned bowed politely.
"I'm sorry he didn't have time to say his prayers before he died, for he was very bad," innocently said the girl.

"Prayin' wouldn't do him any good, miss," answered Ned, and he gazed at the young girl before him with deep interest.

She was very pretty, had a well-knit form, was dressed in a style that showed considerable taste for the frontier, and her long brown hair hung in braids down her back.

She was well matured for her age, and she stood before Ned fearlessly now, knowing that she was no longer alarmed for her safety with such a protector near.

"What is your name?" she asked in her frank way, as she saw Ned regarding her.

"Nevada Ned."

"Are you from Nevada?"

"I was, and that is why they called me Nevada Ned; but I am from Colorado now."

"Have you no other name?"

"Yes, several."

"What are they?"

"The Indians call me Gold Hair, and the miners down at the canyon where I live call me the Boy Gold King."

"Oh! you must be a great man."

"No, I am but a boy."

"You are a dead shot."

"Yes, I shoot well."

"How old are you?"

"I am going on sixteen."

"And I am going on twelve," she innocently said, while Nevada Ned gallantly remarked:

"Just the right age to be my sweet little friend."

"Indeed I will be, for you saved me from those horrid men."

"Why did they wish to steal you?"

"Oh, I'm an heiress, and they wanted to get gold, I suppose."

"That dead man there came to the cabin, and I gave him food, for he said he was a poor miner out of work, and we took care of him for two days."

"To-day he told me to come into the timber and see some birds he had snared, and then he took hold of me, and ran up here where he met that one-armed man."

"And you live near here?"

"Yes, down in the valley yonder."

"Is it a mining-camp?"

"Yes, Golden Gulch City."

"What is your name, miss?" asked Ned.

"Marie, but the boys in camp all call me Goldbeam."

"It is a pretty name; but had you not better go home now, for your friends will be anxious about you."

"Yes, and you will go with me, for you look tired and hungry, and the boys will be so glad to see you, after you have saved their child."

"Whose child?"

"The boys' child, for I am the child of the miners, you know, as I am a waif, and have no father and no mother."

Ned was touched by the words of the little girl, and after a moment, said:

"Yes, I will go with you, for I am tired and hungry; and as this horse was intended for you to ride, you shall have him, and I'll take the other one."

"Oh! will you give me the horse?" cried Goldbeam, in a joyous voice.

"Yes, for I suppose they are as much mine as anybody's else; but I'll get my horses, too," and catching the two animals left by Jack Hollis in his rapid flight, Ned gave them to Goldbeam to hold, while he went into the thicket after his horses, and soon returned.

Then, with another awed look at the dead outlaw, Goldbeam led the way down the trail, saying in her frank way:

"Don't you feel bad, Nevada Ned, that you killed him—for he was no good, and the boys would have hanged him if they had caught him."

"I will come back, with some of them, and bury him," said Ned.

"No, let the boys do it, for I will tell them where to find it."

"See, there is Golden Gulch City, and the big cabin there by the pine is where I live," and she pointed out to Nevada the mining-camp, as a bend of the trail brought them in full view of it.

CHAPTER XVIII.

GOLDBEAM.

NEVADA NED had not been an hour in Golden Gulch City before he found that he was in great luck.

The place was a rude mining-camp, it is true,

situated in a pleasant valley, while the miners worked the surrounding mountains, canyons and streams for gold; but it was fortunate in having as its inhabitants as square a set of men as ever were congregated together in one border settlement.

The miners were leaving off work as Nevada Ned and Goldbeam descended the trail, and the first ones they met quickly heard the story of her peril from her lips, and they hastened up the hill to look after the body of Nick Sloan, whose history, as he knew it, the youth gave them.

Ned was at once invited to the cabin of the "great man" of Golden Gulch City, and who was the oracle of the camps.

This man was Doctor Tom Wood, an Englishman, who had all subjects upon his tongue's end, and a man of courtly manners and superb bearing.

He was over six feet in height, straight as an arrow, had a most intelligent, handsome face and was as brave as a lion.

He had once been a surgeon, in the English Army, it was said, but a student of nature, and a seeker after knowledge, he had sought the United States and boldly penetrated to the far frontier.

It was said of him that he had dwelt among the Indians for a year or more, studying their rude surgery and knowledge of curative plants and roots, and then, as his finances grew low, and no remittances came from home, he had sought the gold mines in the hope of finding a fortune.

Certain it is that Doc Wood, the "Wizard Medicine-Man," as he was called, was kept pretty busy looking after the wounds and ailments of the miners, and got more gold as fees from them, than he dug out of the ground.

A fine talker, full of anecdotes and stories, and certainly skilled in his profession, Doc Wood had risen to be the head and front of Golden Gulch City before he had been there a month.

The boys had clubbed together and erected him the finest cabin in the town, and as the miners brought him every stone, rock, shrub or plant they found, his office indeed looked like a museum.

When Goldbeam told the doctor about her danger and rescue, he grasped Nevada Ned's hand with a force that made the bones bend, and said in his deep, hearty voice:

"My boy, you have done more for Golden Gulch City than gratitude can ever pay you for, and as long as you will honor me with your company, you are my guest."

"Why, young sir, if those devils had gotten away with Goldbeam this camp would have gone in mourning and struck work, while if money was what the villains wanted, every miner would have given half his dust to get her back again."

"Come, sir, come to my home, and should you desire to study medicine, surgery, and become a great doctor, I will instruct you, sir."

Ned then found himself ushered into the doctor's house, and a spare room, used for laying out dead miners in until their burial, was placed at his disposal, though no hint was given him of its former ghastly uses.

His horses were taken in charge by Hop Flea, as the doctor called his Chinese servant, and after a most substantial supper Ned was presented individually to the miners as they dropped in to see the brave youth who had saved Goldbeam the Waif of Golden Gulch.

"What did you do with the rascal's body, Buck?" asked Doc Wood of a young miner.

"We put him in Dick Rallin's cabin, doctor, for you to see him, for we didn't wish to bury him until you had."

"Right you are, Buck, for I desire to dissect the fellow and note the peculiarities of a brain so wicked as to prompt the carrying off of our pretty Goldbeam," and turning to Ned he continued:

"And you, my fine fellow, shall see me do the work, for it will be interesting to you to trace the course your bullet took through the man's skull."

Ned bowed his thanks for the honor shown him, but could not see the particular interest he could feel in following his bullet's path through a man's head.

In honor of the event Doc Wood invited the crowd to the Set-'em-Up Bar in the Gulch, and all drank the health of Nevada Ned with a gusto.

On the way back the doctor gave the history of the pretty waif in these words:

"You see, my young friend, Goldbeam is the only girl in our camp, and she is a pet with one and all of us."

"Some years ago a man came into the camp, and he had with him this little girl, whom he called Marie, and said she was his child; but we doubted it, for there was no resemblance between them, and the girl seemed to fear him."

"He built him the cabin there, near mine, and where Goldbeam now lives all alone, for she has nothing to fear, and the boys call her home Eden."

"Well, he prospected around, struck a light lead and was doing pretty well, when one night he got full of rum at the Set-'em-Up Bar, and was threatening to carmine the Gulch, when I dropped in."

"I saw there were not the men there that had the sand to tackle him, nor the skill to kill him if they shot at him, so I told him to go home and stop making a fool of himself."

"Why, Nevada Ned, it acted on him like a galvanic battery, for he sprung at me like a tiger, a knife in his hand."

"Of course it was a suicidal act on his part, for I killed him, and buried him at my expense the following day, yes, and read the service over him, too, for I do the work of the chaplain, as there is none in camp."

"To my delight Goldbeam then told me that she was not his child, but had been afraid to say so while he lived, and that her pretended father had stolen her from her home in the East, to avenge himself upon her parents for some reason."

"Well, Golden Gulch at once adopted the little waif, and christened her Goldbeam, while, as she could not tell us her parents' full name and address, we determined to set apart for her a certain sum each year as her fortune, and it is growing in value, I can tell you."

"Now, Nevada Ned, you know just what you have done for Golden Gulch City in saving the Goldbeam, and I tell you, in the name of its inhabitants, you are welcome to make this your home as long as you desire to stay, while I shall be most happy to have you as a student of medicine under me."

Ned expressed his thanks to the doctor, and, as he was a kind of Boy Wanderer, said he would remain in Golden Gulch for awhile, and study under the Wizard Medicine-Man, for the youth had a strong leaning toward medicine.

The result of Ned's rescue of the little maiden was therefore to make him a citizen of Golden Gulch City.

He was given the right hand of fellowship by one and all the next morning, when his intentions became known; but he declined with thanks the kind invitation of Doc Woods to attend and see him dissect Nick Sloan and then bury him with funeral honors, for such was the custom of Golden Gulch, and, after a man was dead, no matter what had been his life, no grudge was held against him.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE OVERLAND STAGE.

NEVADA NED had no reason to repent of his decision, to remain in Golden Gulch City, as the time went by.

He liked the doctor immensely, became attached to the miners, thought the scenery grand, the surroundings pleasant, and, most of all did he admire and like Goldbeam.

Supplied with money for his present uses, Ned did not go to prospecting at once to try and find a mine, but passed his time in listening to the doctor's teachings, and hunting the woods and canyons for plants, herbs and any botanical specimen they could find for the great Wizard Medicine-Man to experiment with.*

When not studying in the doctor's office, Nevada Ned was riding through the mountains with Goldbeam, visiting the various camps, or practicing with rifle and revolvers, with both of which weapons he found that the young girl was considerable of an expert.

The first Sunday after his arrival in Golden Gulch City Nevada Ned nearly paralyzed all the inhabitants, by dressing up in his Gold King suit.

He had held on to it religiously, through his winter in the lone cabin, and getting it out of his pack, had brushed up his rig for this occasion, for the doctor had told him that all the miners "brushed up" for the Sabbath, and put on their best.

Their brushing up was to perhaps put on a new woolen shirt, a pair of boots, or a hat, to break them in, and so when Ned appeared with

* Doctor Thomas T. Wood is now a prominent practitioner of medicine, having made the United States his home.—THE AUTHOR.

his gorgeous rig, gold chain, watch, spurs and all, they gazed on him as upon a being from another sphere.

"Go a trifle slow, Ned, and let us get our wind."

"Don't spring it on us all at once, for you should have written and prepared us for it," said the doctor, who was out in a handsome new suit of buckskin, which Hop Flea had beaded in Chinese designs for him.

He had expected to do some "paralyzing" himself, when he appeared in his new rig, which had been a secret between Hop Flea and himself; but when Nevada Ned came out as the Boy Gold King, he knocked the wind out of the sails of the Wizard Medicine-Man.

A handsome young man, as was the doctor, with his splendid form, brilliant black eyes and raven hair and mustache, he was a striking contrast to Nevada Ned, with his fearless boyish face, long golden hair, blue eyes and gorgeous attire, and the miners gazed upon the two with unbounded admiration.

But Goldbeam was in raptures over Ned's get-up and told him over and over again how handsome it was, and admired his chain and gold-mounted weapons, with his sombrero and its dazzling ornaments, until the youth said:

"Goldbeam, you shall have a gold-mounted rifle too, and a sombrero with gold dollars around it, for I will get them for you."

And Ned kept his word, for some months after they came along with some goods ordered by the solitary storekeeper in Golden Gulch City, and when the young girl had donned them the doctor said cheerily:

"Now we will have to call you the Gold Queen, little one."

Thus a year passed away and Nevada Ned still remained in Golden Gulch City.

He had written to his uncle by the monthly mail, telling him of his winter adventure, and that he was well and happy, and he also wrote to a boy pard he had known in the mines near Denver, and whose name was Texas Harry, stating that he would some day return to his old cabin and claim, but he did not know exactly when.

Prospecting in the neighborhood of Golden Gulch City, Ned was lucky enough to find several valuable "gold pockets," which brought him quite a snug sum, and this luck, with his gaining medical lore daily, as the doctor expressed it, and being near Goldbeam, filled his cup of joy about to the brim.

About a year after Ned's arrival, Golden Gulch City became wild with delight, for the Overland Stage Company ran a weekly coach through the camps, and this so elated the miners that they thought they were in the very center of civilization.

Until every man in Golden Gulch City had made a trip on the stage to the end of the line and back, the coaches did a thriving business; but their curiosity satisfied, the travel dropped down to the few who were compelled to trust their lives and pocketbooks to the danger of a run on the Overland route through that wild country.

So much had the stage pleased Ned, that one ride did not satisfy him, and time and again he was wont to go the hundred miles to the end of the line and back, always riding with the driver, and half the time handling the ribbons himself. Doctor Wood said to Goldbeam one day:

"I guess Ned has given up medicine for the road, my child, and I'm sorry, for he has a nerve like iron, and helped me to cut that poor miner's arm off the other day with a coolness that equaled mine."

"Just hint to him, Goldie, that medicine is better than stage-driving."

Goldbeam promised, and when Nevada Ned got back from his trip, he heard a small lecture from the pretty little Gold Queen, and promised not to go again for a month.

CHAPTER XX.

ON THE OVERLAND TRAIL.

TRUE to his promise to Goldbeam, Nevada Ned did not take another trip on the Overland stage for a month, greatly to the regret of Dick Darling the driver, who had come to like the young miner greatly.

Then it was that Ned decided to make a visit to his old mining-camp to see his friends, and to work there on some leads where he hoped to strike it rich, and which his going away had prevented his doing.

He also wished to see if his buried gold, to the amount of about four thousand dollars was safe.

So he told Dick Darling on his up trip, that he would go through when he came back, to Denver, and from there make his way to the mine.

"All right, Nevada, I'll be glad to have yer, fer I've missed you o' late."

"But I drive my finest team when I come down ag'in, and you can handle ther ribbons all yer like."

Ned then gave out that he was going away for a month, and he bade Hop Flea to look after his horses for him, and told Goldbeam he would leave the key of his little cabin with her, for the miners had helped him build a snug little log home not far from the Wizard Medicine-Man's home.

Dressing himself in his best, the afternoon he expected the stage through, Nevada Ned bade farewell to Goldbeam, whose eyes filled with tears, and with a grasp of Doc Wood's hand and a wave of his sombrero to the boys about the Lighthouse Inn, he mounted the box by the side of Dick Darling and away rolled the stage, those who saw it depart little dreaming what was in store for it far along on the Overland trail.

The stage had rolled into the station, thirty miles out from Golden Gulch City, and had there met the coach from further up in the hills, for the short line met Dick Darling's coach there.

Supper, such as it was, was given the half-dozen passengers in the two coaches, Dick Darling's horses were changed for fresh ones, and his coach rolled away, while he whispered to Ned:

"Did you hear what Tupper told me, lad?"

"No, Dick."

"Did yer see a box go under our feet, here?"

"Yes."

"It came down in Tupper's coach from the Bonanza mines above."

"Well?"

"It is gold."

"Is it, Dick?"

"It is for a fact, and it goes through to Denver."

"I see."

"Thar is thousands in that box."

"It is indeed valuable, Dick."

"True, and it has cost many a poor miner hard work to dig it, and we must look out that some thieving band of road-agents don't get it from us."

"Do you fear road-agents ahead, Dick?"

"They have been pretty bad along the Overland trails o' late, Nevada."

"Well, there are six men inside, and we two, Dick, so it will be a large gang of road-agents that could get away with us."

"Lad Ned, yer don't understan' their way o' doin' biz."

"Yer see they has thet advantage from ther jump."

"How?"

"Waal, it's 'Hands up!' and ef I don't mind, why I'm a dead man."

"Then they calls out to them as is in ther hearse ter git out and lay down flat on ther faces."

"If thar is a shot by some durned fool, why then the hearse is riddled clean through, the agents picks ther geese and rides away, see?"

"Yes, but I should think we might risk a fight with them, for the road-agents are hardly ever, I have heard, over half a dozen in number."

"Ned, you talk sense, and I for one am a man as will take chances if t'others will."

"I will."

"I know that, as does all who is acquainted with yer."

"I have a good deal that is valuable about me, Dick, my chain, watch, weapons and some little money, not to speak of my hat and spurs."

"You is worth a clean thousand in dust scattered over yer from yer head ter yer heels, Ned."

"Yes, and more, so I will fight for it."

"You bet yer will, but will t'others inside?"

"We can ask them."

"We can, and I hopes they will, for I've got a precious load here under my feet, and I'll take big chances with lead to run it through."

"Well, ask them, Dick."

It was a beautiful moonlight night, and everything near stood out boldly in the silvery light. Handing the reins to Ned, Dick told him to come to a halt.

The horses were full of go, and it was no easy task to rein them in; but Ned brought them to a halt, and Dick scrambled down from the box. "What's up, driver?" asked a man somewhat timidly.

"I will tell yer, pards, thet nothing is up

now, but I has heerd o' late thet ther road-agents is thick on ther trail."

A murmur was heard within the stage, while a firm voice said:

"If they attack us, we must beat them off, that is all."

"Pard, you has got grit, and that is ther music I sings, and my young pard on ther box j'ines in ther same tune with us, so who else shouts?"

"No one else answered, and Dick said:

"I tell you, pards, if we shows our teeth, my idea is they will run, and if you backs me up, I'll drive through."

"What does yer say?"

"I will aid you, my man, all in my power."

"You is the feller with sand as spoke before; but who else speaks up?"

"I think it would be useless to throw our lives away," one said.

"I have but little money with me, and I will not risk death to keep it," another remarked.

This seemed to be the opinion of four out of five men in the stage, and Dick frankly expressed his opinion of them by saying:

"Waal, of all men without sand, four of you six beats any I've ever come across."

"Waal, I'll go through on this hearse if I can, and if I do, durned ef I don't ask the agents to give you a time, for I'll tell 'em you has got diamonds hid all over yer," and with a laugh at his own conceit, Dick Darling sprung upon ther box once more, and the impatient driver moved on again.

"Ned, yer mind ther tall, fine-looking gent we noticed back at ther station?"

"Yes, Dick."

"He's ther one as has got ther sand, and he'll fight."

"And there was another?"

"Yas, a miner; but these two is all we kin count on."

"Well, you'll push through if you are ordered hands up?"

"I'll do it, Ned; only I hope it will be afore we reaches the Devil's Backbone, fer yer know that is as dangerous a piece o' road fer a few miles as ever man wanted to drive over in daylight, let alone at night: but you knows it, Nevada?"

"Yes; and you remember I have driven over it with you several times?"

"Yas; and you handles ther ribbons like an old Rocky Mountain stage-driver."

"Thank you for the compliment, Dick."

"It's true; but Ned?"

"Yes, Dick."

"If I goes under, will you push the hearse on?"

"Yes, but don't think of that."

"I must, for somehow I feels a load here o' late," and he placed his hand upon his heart.

"You may not be feeling well, Dick, so stop on the way back and let Doc Wood give you some medicine."

"Well, he kin fetch me round if any man kin, while the boys do say you is no slouch in doctorin', Nevada."

"Oh, I'm a kind of quack, Dick, for you see all I know I learned among the Indians, and from Doc Wood," said Nevada Ned, modestly.

"Don't you deceive yerself, Nevada, fer Injuns hain't no fool doctors, fer ther medicine-men is posted on what is medicine and what hain't, what is good and what are p'izen, and it so stands ter reason they sh'd be, as they is children o' natur'."

"I tell yer, Ned, I'd trust a Injun medicine-man quicker than I would half the college doctors as I has seen; but I'll stop on ther way back, if I gits thar, and hev Doc Wood see ef my liver hain't flopped on me, as makes me feel so down-hearted as I does!"

"He'll fetch you round all right, Dick; but we are nearing the Devil's Backbone."

"Yes, Nevada, and—"

"Halt! Hands up!"

And a deep voice rung out sharply from the side of the road, breaking in on the words of the driver.

CHAPTER XXI.

A WILD RIDE.

THE sudden cry that rung out from the roadside caused all, driver and passengers alike, to give a sudden start.

They had perhaps expected a summons to "stand and deliver," and certainly dreaded it; but, coming out of the dark thicket upon one side, it had been like the call of death.

Just where the stage was at that time, there were large trees overhanging the road, and beyond it was the narrow trail known as the Devil's Backbone.

The latter was a zigzag drive, with just space enough for the stage it seemed, sharp bends and with precipices upon either side, and lasted for a couple of miles, when a broad, straight trail led down into the valley where the mining-camps were.

Being in semi-darkness, neither Dick Darling nor Ned could see the one who ordered them to halt, but they both knew that rifles and revolvers were upon them, and eyes watched their movements.

In an instant, having determined to run the gantlet, Dick Darling yelled at his horses, while at the same time he dodged to avoid a shot, and cried:

"Down, boy!"

As they did so, a couple of shots came from within the stage, and the road-agents, not expecting to be fired on or to see the driver dash away, were at first taken aback.

"Fire!"

The same voice that had challenged gave the order, and half a dozen shots rung out, while dark forms sprung from the thicket out into the roadway.

"Ned, I've got it! Take the ribbons and haul 'em up! It's no use now!" cried Dick Darling, as he fell back upon the stage-coach.

Nevada Ned grasped the ribbons, but he was not one to "give it up," without a struggle, and he urged the horses on.

Away they dashed now, directly toward the Devil's Backbone, going at full speed, while from each window of the coach some one was firing back upon the outlaws.

One road-agent had been thrown down by the spring of the horses, as he grasped the bit of a leader, and the hoofs and wheels had passed over him.

Another had uttered a cry of pain as he sprung toward the coach window, and got a shot from within.

But he rallied as he staggered back and shouted:

"Mount your horses and run them down!"

"Don't let one escape!"

Instantly the scene became a most exciting one.

The coach, drawn by its four spirited horses, shot out into the moonlight, going at a terrific pace.

Dick Darling lay back upon the seat, his head resting upon the top of the coach, and he was dying.

Nevada Ned held the reins, and braced in the seat, was driving the horses along the dangerous ridge at a pace where an accident meant death to all.

From the windows of the coach two men leaned out, one in miners' dress, the other in the attire of a traveling man, and they were firing back upon a half-dozen horsemen who were in hot pursuit.

It was a moment of desperate peril, but Nevada Ned seemed equal to the responsibility thrust upon him by the wounding of Dick Darling.

Surging wildly the stage coach held on its way, the horses now at full speed, yet Ned made each turn with a nerve and skill that was wonderful.

The road-agents naturally gained on the coach and they kept up a steady fire, for the resistance offered proved to them that they were chasing a rich prize.

Presently one of the men at the window of the stage disappeared, and Ned heard a shout within and excited talking.

But he looked not back, he heeded nothing behind him, for his duty lay ahead, in going safely over that wild roadway, and leaving the road-agents as far in the rear as possible.

From moonlight into shadow the stage sped, and at last the Devil's Backbone was passed in safety and the down grade trail to the mines was before them.

Poor Dick Darling, unable to cling on, would have fallen off, had not Ned pressed hard against him.

The road-agents, seeing that the stage had run the gantlet of the ridge, and reached the broad trail down to the valley, fired a parting volley and rode back, but the four horses, aroused by the chase, were not easily checked, tug at the reins as Ned might, and with the slope throwing the vehicle upon them, as it were, they still kept up the same breakneck speed to the valley.

"The horn, Ned, the horn!" gasped Dick Darling, and Ned unslung the long stage-horn and handed it to him.

Then, clear, winding, weirdlike, the notes of the stage-horn were heard, floating over the valley, echoing from the hills, and telling the miners gathered at the rude tavern that Dick Darling was coming.

And many were gathered there, and some were mounting in haste, for the firing up the mountain had been heard, and all knew that there was trouble.

As the stage came in sight of the lights of the tavern, a party of horsemen met it, and a wild shout greeted them, while a voice cried:

"Dick, we thought you was done fer, and were going to fight fer yer."

"Go on to the other end of the Devil's Backbone, for the road-agents attacked us there, and some of them are dead or wounded," shouted Ned, and away sped the dozen horsemen, while the horses were pulled up suddenly before the door of the tavern.

"Three cheers fer Dick Darling fer runnin' through on time!" cried a voice, not recognizing, beneath the shadow of a large tree, that the brave driver was not holding the ribbons.

The cheers were given with a will, and Dick said, faintly:

"I thanks yer, pard, but Dick Darling is done fer, so take me down gently, and I'll inter-dooce to yer ther Boy Gold King, Nevada Ned, and he are ther one as fetched ther old hearse through, and he kin do it any time."

Ned received three cheers as he raised his hat, having cast aside the reins, and then aided in lowering Dick Darling from the box.

There were wounded men inside, too, one being the gentleman who had so firmly backed Dick up in the idea of resistance.

He was shot in the side, though he said not seriously, and so it proved, while the very timid individual had received a dangerous wound.

All were taken into the tavern and cared for by a miner doctor who was there, and Dick Darling was pronounced to be dying, while the passenger referred to was shown to have had a close call, the bullet glancing on a rib over his heart, and inflicting merely a flesh wound.

Until he died Nevada Ned stood by Dick Darling, and then turned away with tears in his eyes, to see the wounded stranger gazing at him.

"Permit me to thank you, young sir, for saving my life," said the stranger, grasping the young Gold King's hand.

"I was in the same box, sir, so saved my own; but I am sorry poor Dick had to go."

"It is sad indeed, for he was a brave fellow; but I never saw such a superb driver as you are, or a more magnificent feat than you run to-night."

"Thank you, sir, for the compliment; but the horses knew the road and kept it, though I thought we had to go several times."

"If we had gone over the Razor Edge, we would have found it two hundred feet to bottom."

"You must know the road well indeed."

"No, sir, I have only been over it a dozen times, or so, but I have studied it well, and yet from habit, rather than from an idea I would need to know the road some day; but I am glad you are not much hurt, sir."

"I am indeed fortunate, for I came out here upon a mission of great importance, to find one who can make, or mar my life, and perhaps you can tell me if you know a man by the name of Hollis?"

"I know a road-agent by the name of Hollis, sir."

"John Hollis?" eagerly asked the stranger.

"Yes sir, I suppose so, for we knew him as Jack Hollis."

"And where is he?" and the voice of the stranger quivered with emotion.

"I'll tell you all that I know of him, sir," and Ned told of his meeting with the desperado in the Nevada silver mines, and all that had followed there.

CHAPTER XXII.

LOST AND FOUND.

THE stranger listened most attentively to the story Ned had to tell of Jack Hollis, and his attack on Oddie at Wright's Hotel, when he lost his arm.

"Describe him, please."

Ned did so.

"The very man; but have you not seen, or heard of him since; Nevada Ned?" asked the stranger.

"Oh yes, sir."

"When and where?"

"A little over a year ago, when I went to Golden Gulch City to live."

"I had gotten snowed in the mountains, having lost my way, and when spring came was on the trail to the Colorado mines, when I saw signs of a well-traveled track."

"I hid my horses in the bushes and was reconnoitering on foot, when who should ride up but Jack Hollis."

"I knew him at a glance, and hiding behind a boulder, he did not see me."

"He was well mounted and led two horses, their lassoes being over the horn of his saddle."

"He stopped near me, and I learned from his words for he talked aloud to himself, that he was waiting for some one."

"Soon that some one came, and it was Nick Sloan, a pard of Jack's, and his equal as a rascal."

"They had been up to some deviltry, as I supposed, and Nick held a girl in his arms."

"A girl?" gasped the stranger.

"Yes, sir, one he had just kidnapped down on the hillside, for it was near the Golden Gulch City mining-camps."

"Did you see the girl?"

"I guess I did, sir, for finding they were going to carry her off, I chipped in; Nick started to draw on me, and I got in my fine work first, and killed him."

"And Hollis?"

"He just went flying as though the devil was in chase, leaving the two horses there."

"And the girl?"

"Oh, she was all right."

"Have you seen her since?"

"I should just think so, for I left her yesterday in Golden Gulch City."

"Tell me of her," and the stranger seemed excited.

"She's pretty as a mountain pink, and an awful nice girl."

"What is her name?"

"Goldbeam."

"Is that all?"

"The boys call her the Gold Queen, too."

"How old is she?"

"I guess she's about thirteen, sir."

"Great God! can this be my child?"

"Your child, sir?"

"Yes; but then she has her parents with her there doubtless?"

"No, sir."

"No parents?"

"She is called the Waif of the Gold Mines, for she has no regular father and mother, though all in the camp call her their child."

"And when did she come there?"

"Some two years ago, I believe."

"How?"

"A fellow brought her there, and said he was her father; but he treated her bad, got drunk one night, tried to run the mines, and Doc Wood made grave-food out of him."

"He killed him?"

"Yes, sir, Doc Wood did."

"Who is this Doc Wood?"

"A young English doctor, sir, that lives in the mines, and is a splendid fellow."

"We call him the Wizard Medicine-Man, for he can do all but raise a dead man, the boys say."

"And the girl?"

"Doc Wood took her in charge as guardian, and the camp adopted her, for she said the man was not her father, but had stolen her from her home in the East."

"Did you know his name?" and the stranger asked the question in a whisper.

"They found his name was Edward Thorn, after he died."

"Edward Thorn! He was the intimate friend of John Hollis."

"Nevada Ned, listen to my story, and see if I am not right in saying that little waif of the camps is not my own child."

"I live in the East, and my wife had as lovers John Hollis and Ed Thorn."

"They were cousins, and a bad pair, and swore revenge against me when she became my wife."

"Several years ago our child, Marie, was—"

"Marie is Goldbeam's name," said Nevada Ned, deeply interested.

"There can be no doubt of it then, for she was stolen from us while I was absent in South America on business."

"Upon my return, which was long months after, I started out to find my child."

"Six months ago I discovered that she had been brought West to the mining-camps, and that Edward Thorn had taken her away from Hollis and fled with her, no one knew where."

"I then began to visit the different mines in search of the men who had robbed me, and to try and get back my child, and through you, my brave young friend, I feel that I have found her at last."

"Now, when does the stage return to Golden Gulch City?"

The question was heard by the landlord of the tavern and he said:

"It should go, stranger, early in the morning, but there is no one to drive it back, unless the Gold King here will do so."

"What do you say, Ned?"

"I will drive it through if you wish it, for there are drivers at the other end of the run who can take it."

"Then out she goes; but do you book for the trip, stranger?"

"I do, landlord, and I wish the seat on the box with our young driver here."

"So be it, and I guess few will go through this run, as the Knights of the Road have given them a scare; but here come the boys that went up into the mountains to find the agents who jumped you," and as the landlord spoke, a party of horsemen and others on foot, came up to the door of the tavern.

CHAPTER XXIII.

RETRIBUTION.

THE horsemen who had gone up into the mountains returned with one dead man, he who had been crushed by the wheels, as he fell in front of the horses, one dying from a wound, and two slightly wounded.

The dying man was the chief, and with one glance at him, the stranger said:

"That is the man I shot, as he dashed up to the window!"

"And that man is Jack Hollis," Nevada Ned rejoined, quickly.

The stranger stepped quickly to the side of the dying man, gazed intently into his wicked, bearded face, and said, slowly:

"So it is! You are Jack Hollis, though sadly changed from the man I knew thirteen years ago."

The outlaw made no reply, and the stranger continued:

"Where is my child, Jack Hollis?"

"I do not know?"

"You mean you will not tell me?"

"Yes."

"I know."

"You do not."

"Ask this brave young man."

The eyes of the road-agent captain turned slowly upon Nevada Ned.

The film of death was coming over his eyes, but he recognized the youth and hissed forth:

"Curses on you, boy!"

"Your curses, Jack Hollis, have come home to roost," said Nevada Ned, as he turned away.

"Yes, I know where my child is, Jack Hollis. I know that Ed Thorn is dead, and retribution has come at last upon you; but still I say, may Heaven have mercy upon you!"

The dying man shuddered, but uttered no word, and from that moment did not again speak, dying an hour after.

His death seemed to awaken the excited miners to the fact that they had a duty to perform, and loud rung the cries:

"Up with the other two of 'em!"

"They are wounded," said Nevada Ned.

"That don't make no difference, for they hain't hurt bad."

"Up with 'em!" was the response.

And out they were dragged, a convenient tree served as a gallows, and up to it were dragged the shrieking wretches and left hanging there, a ghastly sight in the moonlight.

At dawn the stage rolled away from the log tavern, and Nevada Ned held the reins, while by his side sat the father of Goldbeam.

There was no passenger inside, no treasure-box under the boot, but along on top, wrapped in a blanket, was the dead form of poor Dick Darling, going back to his home, Golden Gulch City, to be buried.

Swiftly Nevada Ned sent the horses along, the cross-roads were reached on time, fresh animals were attached, and then on to Golden Gulch City went the stage, arriving in the afternoon to the minute when due.

It caused a stir among the few miners about, to see Nevada Ned on the box, alone with a stranger, and Dick Darling not visible.

But the shot-marks on the coach told the story, and in a few words Nevada Ned made known all, and the body of the driver was lowered from its perch.

"Doc, where's Goldbeam?" asked Nevada Ned, addressing Doctor Wood.

"She is hunting up in the hills, Ned."

"Doc, I've got to drive the hearse through to the end of the run, so I can't stop; but I'll come back on the down trip with a new driver."

"All right, Ned, you can do it if any one can."

"Doc, I wish to introduce to you my friend

here, a stranger in these parts, but one I have found square, and he has got a story to tell you that will surprise you."

"Pard, this is Doc Wood, and when he has heard all you have to say, he'll know what to do," and Ned turned to the stranger, who grasped his hand warmly and said:

"I will see you upon your return! Good-by."

Ned sprung upon the box, a cheer greeted him, and away rolled the stage, carrying no passenger, the Boy Gold King going alone on the long run of thirty miles through the mountains, so full of dangers; but he made the run in safety, and two days after, the stage rolled into Golden Gulch City, another driver in Dick Darling's place, and Nevada Ned seated by his side.

As they drew rein at the tavern, Ned saw Goldbeam dash out, and she cried in a joyous voice:

"Oh, Ned! I have found my papa, and you did it all, you dear, good fellow!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MINER'S "HEIRESS."

THE stage having to pass right on, Nevada Ned stopped over in Golden Gulch City, determined to go later on to his mine.

He did this as Goldbeam hinted that she was going East soon with her papa, and he might not see her again.

Ned knew in his own heart that he would, if they both should live, but he did not so express himself.

Going to his cabin, the doctor followed him and said:

"Gold King, you've done great work in the past few days; but it is just like you, and I have kept poor Dick unburied that you might be at the burial, and we'll go to the grave with him toward sunset, and give him the best send-off that Golden Gulch City can afford; but, Ned, you were in luck to strike the trail of Goldbeam's father, and he was in greater luck, for he is a splendid fellow."

"It comes hard on us, though."

"She goes back with him, then?"

"Yes, soon as her father can get that wound a little healed, and I'm doing my best, though I do hate to part with the girl, as do the boys."

"Why, I believe the whole camp will get drunk with sorrow when she is gone."

"We will miss her."

"You may take oath on that, Ned, and sadly miss her; but the boys are getting together the bags and dust they set aside for her, and she'll have a snug ten thousand, to be given to her father for her, and I guess it will come in well, for he told me he was half-tempted to stay in the mines and try and find gold, as he had given up his business to hunt for his daughter, and was nearly run out of cash, though he had plenty to get back home with."

"I say, Doc."

"Yes, Ned."

"Put a bag of dust worth a thousand in Goldbeam's treasure-box for me."

"I'll get it for you to-night."

"I'll do it, Ned, and I'll match it with one of mine; but you must get Goldbeam's address before she goes, and keep up a correspondence with her, and then, if anything goes wrong in money matters, we shall be able to help her."

"I'll do it, Doc, for I won't lose her trail, you may be certain; but the boys are assembling for the funeral."

"So they are, and I must go."

"But get ready and come, too, and put on your best, out of honor to poor Dick."

Nevada Ned did as the doctor suggested, and he and Goldbeam walked together to the graveyard, following close behind the pall-bearers, while the Wizard Medicine-Man took the stranger with him, leading the way.

All Golden Gulch City turned out to do honor to Dick Darling, and the deep voice of Doctor Wood made the scene very impressive, as he recited from memory the touching burial-service of the Church of England.

After the grave was filled, and all was over, the miners wended their way slowly back, and that night in the bar-room of the tavern, Doctor Wood called all together and presented to Goldbeam her fortune, composed of the gold which each miner had "chipped in for ther Heiress, ther Gold Queen," as one of those present shouted out.

Goldbeam burst into tears but quickly controlling her emotion, she said, as she glanced over the rough-looking crowd:

"Pards, one and all, I thank you, and never will I forget you all in Golden Gulch City."

Rising, and also deeply moved, as soon as the

cheering was over, Goldbeam's father made a short speech that won the hearts of all who heard him, and the meeting broke up with a "glass all round" for the boys, it being Nevada Ned's treat, though he contented himself with drinking water only.

A few days after Goldbeam and her father rolled away from Golden Gulch City, in the Overland stage, followed by the good wishes of the miners, and then Nevada Ned started upon his trip to his old claim, being most anxious to dig a fortune out of the mountains.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONCLUSION.

THE after career of Nevada Ned was full of adventure, but more the adventure of manhood than youth, and his exploits as the Gold King after he got beyond his teens, I leave for another novel.

Though Nevada Ned had trouble in securing his mine he found his treasure still hidden away where he had left it, and, with his young pard, Texas Harry,* he began prospecting for gold.

Their exploits would fill a volume, and, as the years went by they managed to save up a snug little fortune, which Nevada Ned turned to good account by coming East and making Goldbeam his wife, for they had corresponded regularly from the day she had left Golden Gulch City.

As for Doctor Wood, he ruled the mining-camp for some years longer, and then came East to practice his profession, his experience on the border having proven of great service to him.

Towns now stand where the mining-camps of my story then were, but though civilization has effaced the traces of wild border life, there are many still living there who remember well Nevada Ned, the Boy Gold King, and pretty little Goldbeam, the Waif of the Mines.

THE END.

* Harry Austin of Texas, and a thorough Border Boy.—THE AUTHOR.

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